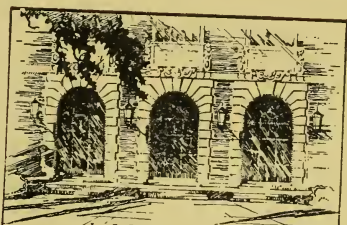


BARABBAS

A DREAM OF THE WORLD'S TRAGEDY

MARIE CORELLI



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The Resurrection ~ ~ ~

BARABBAS

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‘And they consulted how they might take Him, *by subtilty.*’
—*Matthew xxvi. v. 4.*



BARABBAS

A DREAM OF THE WORLD'S TRAGEDY



BY

MARIE CORELLI

AUTHOR OF

'THELMA' 'A ROMANCE OF TWO WORLDS' 'ARDATH'

'VENDETTA!' 'WORMWOOD: A DRAMA OF PARIS'

'THE SOUL OF LILITH'

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL III

SECOND EDITION

Methuen & Co.

18 BURY STREET, LONDON, W.C.

1893

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BARABBAS

A DREAM OF THE WORLD'S TRAGEDY

—♦—
XXXIII

WITH these last strange words ringing in his ears Barabbas went out, wandering almost unseeing in the open street, and trying to concentrate his thoughts upon the things immediately around him. Somehow he found this difficult. His mind was in a dreamy whirl, and he could hardly realise the full extent of all that had occurred to him within the short space of a little more than twenty-four hours. Whole ages seemed to have passed since the early morning of the previous day when he had been released from prison and when the 'Nazarene' had been condemned to die. He had come out of his dungeon, half delirious with joy at the prospect of freedom,

believing in Judith Iscariot, and loving her as a man only loves once in a lifetime. Now he knew her worthlessness,—the unrepenting vileness, treachery and corruption of her life,—and though he loved her still, he was perfectly aware that it was only because he could not yet detach his soul from the clinging memory of her bewitching bodily beauty, and this was a love, or rather a passion, of which he was vaguely ashamed. Ashamed?—he, a thief, a murderer, ashamed of anything? Since when? Why,—only—since he had looked upon the ‘Nazarene.’ It was strange! with all the force of his strong though untutored will, he tried to understand what singularly miraculous power this ‘Man of Nazareth’ possessed, that even now,—now when He was crucified and dead, he, Barabbas, should yet be curiously conscious of His presence, and conscious too that this mystic nearness of Him made all sin appear inexpressibly hateful and humiliating. Sighing uneasily, and angry with himself for being unable to comprehend his own feelings, he rambled about the streets aimlessly at first, but afterwards, recollecting part of his intention, he visited the house of Iscariot. There for the first

time he learned from the servants of the mysterious disappearance of Judith. Sick at heart, he listened while the man who opened the gate told him that search had been made everywhere throughout the city in vain,—and that even now, Iscariot himself was with Pilate the governor, seeking for the help of the law to aid in the discovery of the missing girl. The servant added in awestricken tones that they had found the corpse of Judas uncovered, with a branch of roses laid across it,—and that the rope which had been round his throat was gone. ‘’Tis likely she hath taken it’ — he concluded—‘ Much grief perchance hath driven her distraught. But wheresoever she hath wandered we can hear no tidings of her.’

‘ I will find her ’—said Barabbas—‘ Tell her father when he comes that I will never rest till I discover her. I will seek for her high and low,—living or dead I will bring her home.’

He shuddered a little as the word ‘ dead ’ escaped his lips,—and the man who received his message was startled at the fierce expression of his haggard face, but nevertheless responded dismally that ‘ these were

sore times of trouble,' and also that the self-slain heir of the house, Judas, would be 'buried to-morrow.'

'To-morrow!' echoed Barabbas with a wild stare, scarcely knowing what he said—'Why, to-morrow they say the "Nazarene" will rise again! Why bury Judas? If one dead man can come to life so can another!'

The servant, really alarmed this time, shut to the gate without further parley, privately considering that everybody except himself was going mad, Barabbas in particular,—while Barabbas on his part, perfectly reckless as to his appearance or manner, stumbled blindly and giddily down the sunny street, seeing nothing but the face of Judith as she had looked last night, lifting up her burning eyes from the body of her dead brother, and smiling distractedly on the stern disciple Peter, from out the golden shower of her hair.

'Gone—gone!—and whither?' he muttered as he went—'To Caiaphas? Would she have sought out Caiaphas?'

He checked his pace abruptly. The high-priest's palace was not far off,—he could see the lofty palms and thick-foliaged fig-trees of its private garden to

which none had the entry save the high-priest himself,—but to obtain admittance even to the outer court of the house without the excuse of some business of high sacerdotal importance, would, he knew, be impossible. Moreover his very name, Barabbas, was sufficient to exclude him hopelessly. He sat down on a bench by the roadway and tried to think it out. There were no people passing,—the stillness of the Sabbath reigned throughout the city. Resting his head between his two hands, he pondered all ways and means of obtaining access to Caiaphas, in vain,—no fortress was more impregnable than the high-priest's abode,—no one more haughtily unapproachable in his private capacity than the high-priest in person.

‘Nevertheless, he knows!’ said Barabbas aloud,—‘He is her lover, curse him!—and he knows where she hath fled. It may be she is with him even now.’

As he spoke he lifted his head, and saw that a woman had paused near him and was looking at him wistfully. He recognised her instantly,—by her fair hair, her dreamy face,—her coarse grey linen gown

knotted beneath her bosom by a hempen girdle;—it was Mary of Magdala. Instinctively he rose up, gazing at her as steadily as she gazed at him.

‘Thou art Barabbas?’ she said in tremulous accents; ‘Thou art he who should have died yesterday instead of our Beloved!’

Her voice moved him deeply. It was penetratingly sweet and pathetic,—there was a tremor in it that unnerved him. He tried to remind himself that she was an evil woman,—a thing polluted,—yet while he thought of this he grew in a manner amazed at the limpid purity and beauty of her eyes. They were of a singularly clear blue,—but their wonderful lustre seemed to be a brightness exhaled from inward tears.

‘Thou should’st have died!’ she repeated, and faintly smiled—‘Sorrowful Barabbas!’

He looked at her in vague wonderment.

‘Sorrowful I am in truth,’ he said—‘But what knowest thou of my sorrow? Surely I have good reason to be glad, seeing that I am free once more,—at liberty to live my life out to its end.’

‘And dost thou love thy life and liberty?’ asked Mary softly—‘Dost thou find the world so fair?’

Thou wert not overburdened with rejoicing yesterday, when in the darkness of the death of love, thou didst kneel and weep with me !'

He did not answer her at once, but stood regarding her with a stern intentness. Suddenly he gave a gesture of pain and pity.

'O woman !' he exclaimed passionately—' Beautiful as thou art, why dost thou make of thy beauty degradation ? I know thee !—who does not know thee !—accurst and outcast !—go thy ways—die even as Judas died, rather than live as thou dost live !'

She smiled,—a strange sad smile, that like the pureness of her eyes seemed born of weeping.

'Friend, I have died !'—she said—' At my Lord's feet I laid down all my life. Men made me what I was ; God makes me what I am !'

'Thou art the Magdalen'—responded Barabbas harshly—' And neither God nor man shall alter thee !'

She crossed her small hands on her bosom, and bent her head.

'I was the Magdalen !' and she raised her eyes,

full of bright tears, to the quiet sky—‘Or, rather, of thy charity, say I was that poor affrighted thing, hunted by devils, whom men did torture into being Magdalen.’

‘Whom men did torture!’ repeated Barabbas half angrily—‘Woman, for all thy sins thou hast thyself to blame!’

Her lips quivered.

‘Thou’rt man’—she answered—‘Therefore as man thou speakest! Lay all the burden upon woman,—the burden of sin, of misery, of shame, of tears; teach her to dream of perfect love, and then devour her by selfish lust,—slay her by slow tortures innumerable,—cast her away and trample on her even as a worm in the dust, and then when she hath perished, stand on her grave and curse her, saying—“Thou wert to blame!—thou fond, foolish, credulous trusting soul!—thou wert to blame!—not I!”’

Something in her vibrating accents struck to the heart of Barabbas with a sense of reproach. He drooped his head ashamed, and was silent.

‘Hast thou a right to judge me?’ she queried mildly; ‘Art thou without sin? Nevertheless, let us

not idly reproach one another,—I tell thee Magdalen, as Magdalen, is dead ; I, Mary, live.’

‘What difference dost thou make in such wise ’twixt dead and living!’ murmured Barabbas with a troubled sigh.

‘What difference?’ echoed Mary—‘What difference is there ’twixt the darkness and the light? The Magdalen was wilder than all furies,—mad with the fires of hell,—pursued of devils, bereft of hope,—and ignorant of God—poor soul, poor soul!—she died most piteously and painlessly, slain by a word of pardon from the All-Forgiving! Oh, I cannot choose but weep to think of it! And Mary lives,—Mary, who hath discovered heaven in a broken heart,—Mary, who builds up aerial hopes from tears of penitence,—Mary, whose ears have listened to the music of the Master’s voice—such music!—sweeter than the sweetest song! “Go thy way,” He said—“Sin no more!” O high command!—’Twas as a crown of glory set upon me! “Sin no more!” How could I sin, remembering Him! Who could look once upon Him, and return from that fair light to darkness? Lo, I am newly born, and trembling in

the throes of life,—half weeping, half afraid, but full of love!—love for my Master and my King who hath forgiven me and blessed me!’

Her sweet voice had a rhythmic chime of mingled melancholy and triumph, and Barabbas listened, fascinated and wondering. Presently she came nearer to him.

‘Thou dost not hate me, Barabbas? Or fear me?’

He looked at her fixedly.

‘What the “Nazarene” hath blessed, that I can neither hate nor fear!’

A lovely smile irradiated her face, and her watchful regard of him was like that of some meditative angel.

‘Thou callest Him the “Nazarene” as others do,’ she said—‘because He came from Nazareth. Nevertheless He was a God—He is a God! Knowest thou they say that He will rise again?—but I believe not this. Truly His spirit may arise; but we shall never see Him more as we have seen Him. And that is why last night I wept when they laid His fair body in the tomb,—the body cannot rise, I said, and though as godlike Spirit He will pass to Heaven,

as Man He will appear no more to us. This is the bitterness of death;—we never see our loved ones as we knew them,—in Heaven their faces will be strange!’

She paused,—then went on—

‘Tell me, Barabbas, of thy grief,—for grief thou hast most visibly. I know of Judas and his death,—is it for him thou sorrowest?’

He met her earnest gaze for a moment in silence,—then moved by an impulse of confidence, told her of Judith’s sudden disappearance.

Mary listened attentively.

‘I know her well by sight’—she said—‘A fair proud girl, beauteous and scornful; once she did gather up her robes in haste lest I should brush against them passing her. Thou lovest her, Barabbas?’

He flushed and turned his head aside.

‘I *have* loved her!’ he answered.

‘Doubtless she is all that is most perfect in a woman?’ murmured Mary, half questioningly, half sadly,—‘Chaste, holy, innocent and true?’

Her words stung him with keen agony.

‘Would that she were!’ he exclaimed wildly—
‘But I will not lie to thee. She is—nothing! She
hath been seized by devils,—such devils as did once
move . . . Magdalen!’

She started, turning very pale.

‘Alas, Barabbas!’ she said—‘Then is she most
unhappy and in far worse plight than thou! I will
aid thee in thy search,—it may be she hath wandered
far beyond the city precincts. Hast thou been to
Gethsemane, where her brother died?’

‘Not yet’—he responded wearily—‘I will go
thither now. Where have they buried the “Nazar-
ene”?’

She pointed towards the west.

‘Yonder, near Calvary’—she said—‘In the sepul-
chre of Joseph of Arimathea, between two barren
hills. If thou goest, thou wilt find it guarded.
Caiaphas hath set a watch.’

Barabbas shuddered at the name.

‘Caiaphas!’—he muttered between his set teeth
—‘Always Caiaphas!’ And yet he could not bring
himself to speak of Judith in connection with the
high-priest, and forbore to give expression to his

fear that the lost girl might even now be with the haughty dignitary who was in secret her lover.

‘I will go to Gethsemane’—he repeated mechanically—‘But the body of Judas was not found within the garden, but outside,—and his sister knoweth naught of the secret place of shadows where he perished. Nevertheless I will make search there,—and I will visit the burial-place of the “Nazarene” ere sunset. If thou hearest any news, thou wilt bring it to me?’

‘Where shall I find thee?’ asked Mary.

He gave her the name of the inn where he at present stayed with his acquaintance, Melchior.

‘I shall remember’—she said—‘And if I see the strayed girl anywhere I will follow her,—and if I hear of her I will track the rumour to its source. Meantime fare-thee-well! If thou dost truly visit my Lord’s resting-place ere sunset, pray for me,—for the guard doth forbid me to approach—I may not now go thither until to-morrow.’

‘Until to-morrow!’ echoed Barabbas, and looked at her strangely.

‘Even so,—to-morrow,’—she repeated—‘When the

morning breaks, I shall take flowers and sweet fragrances to strew upon the dead,—they say the guard will be removed at dawn. Farewell! God comfort thee!’

And with a gentle inclination of her head, she wrapped her mantle round her and glided softly and rapidly away.

Barabbas stood looking after her for a moment, lost in thought;—and his lips unconsciously murmured over and over again the word,

‘To-morrow!’

Then, drawing his linen hood well over his brows that he might not be recognised and detained by any of his former acquaintances, he passed through the Sabbath-quieted streets of the city, and out on the road that led towards Gethsemane.

XXXIV

COOL shadows greeted him as he approached the quaint secluded garden which was now destined to be evermore renowned in the world's history. A faint wind swung the heavy foliage of the fig-trees with a solemn sound, and the clear brook that ran between two low banks of moss and turf from which some ancient olives grew, made subdued and soothing music. Down here last night,—here where the shelving ground dipped towards the water,—here where the fig-trees were dark with their darkest bunches of thick leaves, Judas had been found dead ; and it was with a dreary sense of ominous foreboding that Barabbas came to the same place now, in gloomy expectation of some new disaster. Uneasily he lifted the overhanging branches and peered among the flickering tints of dense and

luminous green,—not a living creature was visible. He moved to and fro softly, looking about him everywhere in vague search for Judith,—yet doubting all the while the possibility of finding her in such a spot. Up and down he gazed wistfully,—now towards the winding path ascending to the Mount of Olives,—anon, backward to the shadowy depths of the Valley of Kedron,—and having reconnoitred all the visible landscape immediately outside Gethsemane, he resolved to enter the garden itself. He lifted the latch of the small wooden gate that separated it from the road, and went in among the towering palm-trees and climbing roses that there were made particular objects of cultivation and grew in rich profusion in every available corner. As he wandered slowly along one of the moss-grown paths, he paused to listen. Never, surely, was there such a silence anywhere as here! The murmur of the brook was lost,—the wind failed to stir so much as a small flutter among the leaves,—and the impressive stillness of the place was such, that it seemed as if the voice of God had spoken, saying: ‘Here, where My Beloved cried to Me

in His agony, let there no more be any earthly sound !’

Barabbas hesitated. Seized with a solemn fear, his presence in the garden appeared to himself a strange intrusion, and after a moment or two, he turned back, finding it impossible to proceed. He looked dreamily at the flowers around him ; roses, red and pale, turned their faces upon him in apparent wonderment,—a glowing cactus-tree confronted him, all in a seeming angry blaze of bloom,—the nodding ferns trembled as with interior agitation, and every separate leaf and blade of grass, he fancied, questioned him silently upon the nature of his errand in that sacred haunt, made wonderful by a God’s unselfish sorrow. Word by word, all that the disciple Peter had related concerning the last night spent by the ‘Nazarene’ within this same Gethsemane returned to his mind.

‘Will He possess all things?’ he murmured half aloud—‘A Man of Nazareth, crucified and dead?—shall we not even wander in this garden without His memory haunting us?’

And he hastened his steps, anxious to leave the spot, although he knew not why. A little way

beyond where he stood,—beyond the roses and the sentinel cactus-flowers, the dewy turf still reverently bore the impress of a Form Divine that there had fallen prone and wept for all the world,—wept with such tears as never yet had rained from mortal eyes, —there too had lighted for a little space, a great consoling Angel,—and there no human step had passed since the fair King of perfect Love had gone forth patiently to die.

‘Judith would not be here’—Barabbas muttered, as he left the garden, closing the gate noiselessly after him,—‘’Twas never a resort of hers,—she would not think of coming hither.’

He paused, his heart beating with an undefinable anxiety.

‘No—no,—she would not dream of it’—he repeated — ‘If sorrow hath distracted her, she might more likely have gone towards Calvary, the scene of yesterday. I will visit the tomb of the “Nazarene” and inquire of the guard whether she hath passed them by.’

Thus resolved he walked on his way slowly, full of the most bewildering thoughts. The question

that reigned uppermost in his mind was, strange to say, not what had become of Judith Iscariot, but what and who was the 'Nazarene'? Why did His presence seem to permeate the very air? How was He different to others, that one should not be able to forget Him? He was a Teacher of new doctrine,—well, there had been other teachers of new doctrine, and would be many more. He was brave and beautiful; there were others brave and beautiful likewise. He was not a hero as the world accepts heroes,—He had fought no battles, made no conquests, and owned neither throne nor province. He was simply, or appeared to be a very poor Man, who had been kind and sympathetic to the sorrowful; He had healed a few sick persons, and given the comforting hope of Heaven to those who had no consolation upon earth. Where was the particular marvel of these things? A life so simple, so common,—where was its Divinity? Barabbas pondered the problem vainly,—he was not wise enough to comprehend that perhaps the greatest miracle of the world is this same sort of 'simple' and 'common' life, which is after all neither simple nor common, but most

truly complex and phenomenal. For nothing upon earth is so singular as kindness,—nothing so rare as sympathy,—nothing so absolutely unique, wonderful and purely Divine, as ungrudging, unboastful, devoted, changeless Love that seeks nothing for itself, but freely gives everything. What men call love is often selfishness; what God accepts as love is the entire and voluntary resignation of self for love's own sake. 'In losing thyself'—He says — 'thou shalt find Me,—and in finding Me, thou wilt find all!'

But Barabbas had not the eyes to discern the spiritual side of nature. He could only see what appeared on the surface of life,—of interior meanings he knew nothing. It puzzled him to consider that the mysterious man Melchior, whether he were Egyptian, Greek, or any other nationality, actually accepted this J^ésus of Nazareth as a God,—without question. Why? Because if a God, how would it have been possible for Him to die?

'I must know everything concerning Him'—sighed Barabbas perplexedly—'I must not accept mere rumour. When Judith is found, and when all these present troubles are past, I will go down to Nazareth,

and obtain a true report. It shall be my business ; for if He were Messiah, then are our people cursed for ever with the curse of God that passeth not away. I will not take mere hearsay,—I will prove things. As for His rising from the dead, that cannot be'——

Here, interrupting his meditations, he lifted his eyes to look at the low hills in front of him. At the distance he now was, he could plainly see the ring of white tents that circled the tomb of the 'Nazarene.'

'Truly the watch is set'—he murmured,—'And 'tis an ample guard. There can be no feigning in this fear,—the terror of the priests is real. Cowards and sceptics as they are, they surely deem this Man will rise again !'

The sight of all those soldiers' tents amazed him,—he had thought to find one or two sentinels perhaps on guard,—but that a regular military 'watch' should be encamped round the burial-place of one, who after all, according to the law's estimate, was no more than a crucified criminal, seemed to him positively astounding. The hours of the afternoon were

wearing on rapidly, and he hurried his pace, anxious to reach and examine the tomb itself, but as he came within a few yards of it, a guard confronted him, and with a gruff word, forbade him to proceed further. Barabbas answered the man gently, explaining the errand on which he was bound, and asking whether any one resembling the beautiful Judith had been seen wandering about in the neighbourhood. The soldier looked at him scrutinisingly,—then began to laugh.

‘Why, as I live!’ he said—‘Thou art Barabbas! I am one of those who came to fetch thee out of prison the other morn,—thou wert drunk with the air and light as with new wine, and little didst thou deem that thou wert going to thy freedom! Thou lookest altogether a different man, thus cleansed and fitly clothed; dost find the world altered since thy former days?’

‘Nay, ’tis much the same,’—responded Barabbas somewhat bitterly—‘Evil succeeds, and good perishes; am I not myself a living witness of this, seeing ’tis I who should have been crucified instead of the “Nazarene”?’

'I warrant thou dost not regret His end or thine own escape!' returned the soldier with a grim smile; 'Thou hast not yet been two whole days out of prison, and already thou art searching for a woman! 'Tis ever the way with fierce rascals such as thou, nevertheless however much I may sympathise with thee, I cannot let thee pass me,—the orders that we have are stringent.'

'I well believe it!' said Barabbas, looking wistfully at the sealed-up door of the rocky Sepulchre,—'And I do not urge thee unto disobedience. And concerning the woman I have spoken of, I seek her not for mine own sake,—'tis the daughter of Iscariot that hath strayed from home,—the same Iscariot whose son Judas hung himself for shame that he betrayed the Man of Nazareth. 'Tis thought she is distracted at her brother's death, and that she roams wildly, unknowing whither.'

'By my faith 'tis a sad history!' said the Roman, not without a touch of sympathy,—'This old Iscariot is truly in a piteous case. But no woman, fair or foul, hath been near these precincts all the day so far as I can tell thee. Nevertheless when the watch

doth change at moonrise, and Galbus the centurion takes chief command, I will inform him what thou sayest,—he hath two children of his own, young maidens both,—and should he chance on this strayed lamb he may be trusted to persuade her home. But for thyself, I do advise thee not to linger,—for here, all idlers are suspected thieves,—and if I do mistake not thou hast some past reputation for skilled robbery! Perchance thou would'st not steal a corpse,—for truly 'tis not valuable,—yet all things counted, thou'rt safer at a distance from this place. Frown not! I mean thee well.'

'I thank thee!' said Barabbas briefly, and then stood for a moment, lost in thought and uncertain what to do. It was growing late,—the sun was verging towards its setting. Flecks of crimson, like floating rose-leaves, drifted in the sky immediately above the hill of Calvary, and below these delicate flushes, spread a watery band of green, a translucent sky-lagoon, into which, ere long, the glorious orb of day would plunge and sink like a ship on fire. The landscape, though nearly barren of verdure, had a wild beauty of its own seen thus in the afternoon

glow of the warm Eastern light,—and so Barabbas thought, as his tired eyes roved from point to point unrestfully and with a strained expression of regret and sorrow. The centre of all visible things seemed to be that sealed and guarded Sepulchre; and presently, bringing back his gaze to the bold and martial form of the Roman soldier who still watched him half suspiciously, half curiously, he waved his hand with an expressive gesture towards the tents that were clustered round the mystic tomb.

‘Surely all this is needless waste of trouble and of time?’ he said with forced lightness—‘Who that is sane would fear that a dead man can rise?’

‘Thou mistakest the nature of the fear;’—returned the soldier,—‘No one, not even Caiaphas, is such a fool as to believe in a resurrection of the dead. No, no! — we guard against the living; — this “Nazarene’s” disciples are all within the neighbourhood, and they would steal the body of their former Master willingly, if by this deed, they could assume His prophecies were true. But now are they baffled; they cannot break our ring or pass our ground; and

if the dead Man comes to life again He must Himself find force to rend the rocks asunder, for no human hand will aid the miracle!’

‘Twould be a miracle indeed!’ murmured Barabbas dreamily

‘Ay!—and ’twill not happen,’—laughed the Roman—‘We all know that. And to-morrow, praise be to the gods, the test will have been made and the watch ended, for ’tis the third day,—and if He rise not in keeping with His own saying, ’tis a finished matter, and we shall no more be teased with follies. To-morrow thou canst wander here at will unmolested—to-day I bid thee get hence and home.’

‘And I obey thee’—rejoined Barabbas, turning away—‘Thou wilt speak to thy centurion of Iscariot’s daughter?’

‘Most faithfully.’

‘Again I thank thee. Farewell!’

‘Farewell!’

The soldier resumed his slow pacing to and fro, and Barabbas with a last lingering look at the Sepulchre, went on his reluctant way back towards

the city. He noticed as he passed the further one of the little hills between which the tomb was situated, that there was a deep hollow in the ground such as might have been burrowed out by some wild animal for its sleeping-place. It was large enough to hold a man unseen in its sandy depths,—and as he measured it with a glance, the bold idea struck him that he would come there that very night and hide, as it were, in ambush to watch the Sepulchre also.

‘For if aught should chance that is in any wise miraculous, then I shall witness it,’—he soliloquised ; ‘Or if the disciples of the “Nazarene” should strive to steal His corpse, why then I shall behold the fight ’twixt them and the Roman guard. Most surely I will return hither,—for whatsoever happens it will not be a night for sleep, but vigilance. I can watch,—I too, as well as any other man,—moreover, if marvellous things are to be seen, ’twere well that I should see them. If the dead Man rise again then shall I know He is not man but God ; but unless I see Him living with my own eyes I never will believe. Wherefore to prove this thing I will return hither

this night, and nothing shall prevent me. The judgment and the heart may be deceived,—the reason and the sight, never! 'Twill please me well to play the secret sentinel!—and, as I live, no force shall move me from my post till dawn!'

XXXV

AS he resolved on this plan, he stopped to take a careful survey of the exact situation of the sheltering hollow in which he meant to pass the night. The dust of the road was grey and thick about his feet,—above him the heavens were reddening into sunset-glory. The landscape had no touch of human life about it, save his own solitary figure,—Jerusalem lay before him, a dream of white roofs rather than a reality, and not a sound stirred the heated air. Therefore, in the great hush that prevailed, he was unaccountably startled to see the form of a woman, walking, or rather gliding slowly towards him; she was coming up from the city carrying a sheaf of large white lilies. She was herself, like the blossoms she bore, clad in white, and as she approached with perfectly noiseless footsteps, Barabbas, moved by a

sudden instinct, placed himself directly in her path, fully confronting her, and staring at her with burning, eager, wistful eyes. Her face, pale and marvellously beautiful, was the same he had seen so strangely illumined on Calvary when the bells had begun to ring, and the darkness had slowly dispersed,—a face expressing neither youth nor age, nor any mark of earthly time, but reflecting on its pure and perfect features both maidenhood and motherhood in one, combined with such angelic sweetness, wisdom, sorrow, purity and love as never had before adorned the fairness of any woman born. Barabbas held his breath for very wonderment at sight of her,—something supreme and queenly in her aspect disposed him to fall upon his knees before her in reverence,—yet he refrained from this and stood erect, trembling greatly, but resolved to keep the position he had taken up in the centre of the narrow road, so that she might not pass him without at least a look, a word or a gesture.

‘’Tis the Mother of the Crucified!’—he murmured ;
‘I will speak to her, and ask of her the truth concerning all the marvellous history of her Son,—surely

she will answer!—surely she must answer, seeing it may become a matter of life and death, not only with me, but with the world.'

He waited,—and she came on, holding her lilies with both hands against her breast. Within two or three yards of him, however, she paused, and stood still. So still indeed was she that she might have been a figure of ivory or marble; not a fold of her garments stirred,—not a petal of the lilies she carried quivered,—her calm eyes, clear as heaven, regarded him steadily,—one tress of her fair hair escaping from the white linen head-covering she wore, glittered against her throat,—and on her lips rested the tender shadow of a smile. Behind her flamed the sunset,—round her the very air grew dense and brilliant, as though powdered through with the fine dust of finest amber,—and at her feet one fallen lily-bud opened its satin petals to the light, disclosing its interior heart of gold. Vaguely awed by her very quiescence, Barabbas gazed upon her enthralled, and for the moment stricken speechless,—a wondering, doubting and bewildered sinner, face to face with the Angel-Virgin of the world! The red light of the sinking

sun playing on the whiteness of her garments dazzled him,—she seemed to grow in stature and in majesty even while he looked; and with a sigh of mingled pain, dread and desire, he extended his hands appealingly.

‘Mary of Nazareth!’

The shadow of the smile upon her lips deepened and softened with an infinite compassion. But she neither answered nor moved.

‘Mary, Mother of the “Nazarene”!’ he faltered, trembling more and more, for there was something supernatural in her beauty, something almost terrifying in the mingled meekness and majesty of her regard—‘Hear me, I beseech thee! Thou knowest who I am,—Barabbas,—an evil man of many sins,—and, had the people’s voice been just, ’tis I who should have perished yesterday instead of thy beloved Son. I swear I would have died most willingly,—not at the first—no!—for I did long for liberty and all the joys of free existence; but after I had seen His face, my life seemed to mine own self worthless, and I would have given it gladly to save His!’

Still not a word from her!—only that same mild tenderness of look and smile.

‘They say thy Son blasphemed;’ — pursued Barabbas with increasing agitation, ‘Because He spoke familiarly of God and called Him “Father”! ’Twas a wild utterance,—for now a foolish rumour floats upon the people’s lips,—a rumour most incredible,—alleging that He was in very truth the only Son of God. Why didst not thou, Mary, disprove this idle tale?—for thou, of all the world, dost know the manner of His birth! Thou should’st have warned Him of the danger of His words,—and so might He have saved Himself from the penalty of the law. For were He the holiest man that ever breathed, still in this way of speech He was guilty of a vast presumption,—the great God, the terrible Almighty hath never vested His Divinity in human guise! Knowest thou not, Mary, that this false impression of Him still abides?—and that the whisper of it, passing from mouth to mouth, doth waken the strangest fears and doubts within the souls of men?—and even I, Barabbas, ignorant, guilty, and all unbelieving as I am, grow troubled and perplexed,

seeking the truth and finding none! With thee this matter rests,—thou art the Mother of this “Nazarene,”—’tis not too late to speak—thou canst unravel all the mystery, wherefore I do beseech thee answer me!’

His entreating eyes studied her tranquil face eagerly, but not a sound escaped her lips, not even a faint responsive sigh.

‘Why wilt thou thus keep silence?’ he exclaimed passionately—‘Hast thou thought, Mary, what the result will be, if thou dost suffer this mad and strange report to travel on uncontradicted? For if thy dead Son be declared a God, of birth miraculous and Divine, then must a curse rest on the people of Judæa for having slain Him, and all the world will make a scorn of Israel for endless time! On us will fall the blame and punishment for our rejection of the God-Messiah,—and the nations of the earth will loathe us for our cruelty, our wickedness, perversity and unbelief. Mary, thou knowest! Speak!—wilt thou let the whole world worship a Legend and a Lie?’

As he uttered the last word, a sudden cold shudder

ran through him,—he grew dizzy and faint, but with an effort held his ground, gazing full at her to whom he made his bold and desperate appeal. She had not moved,—but there was an indefinable change in her that startled him. Some mystic light that was not of the sunset seemed cast upon her face, and in her steadfast eyes there shone a radiance more softly brilliant than the glittering of moonbeams on the sea. Half swooning with the force of his own emotions, Barabbas suddenly fell on his knees, grasping the edge of her white robe in one hand.

‘Mary of Nazareth!’ he whispered hoarsely—
‘In pity to me a sinner,—in mercy to the world—
declare the truth! Who was the Father of thy
Son?’

Deep silence followed his daring question. Above the fragrant lilies, her radiant face grew warm with speechless eloquence,—and lifting her eyes she gazed upward—upward,—far into the vistas of ethereal blue;—transfigured by some inward glorious thought, she seemed about to float away upon the air in answer to a voice calling her heavenward! The sun dropped below the horizon and disappeared,—the skies began

to pale into that rapid Eastern twilight which paves the passage of the stars.

‘Not a word!—not a word!’ cried Barabbas then, springing to his feet, and carried out of himself by mingled fervour and ferocity—‘O Woman!—wilt thou deceive Man unto the bitter end? Shall our very God be of thy making? Shall our very creeds be of thy teaching? Must thou command our souls even to the very hope of Heaven? If thou art human, if thou art holy, if thou desirest truth made manifest, speak, Mary, thou who didst bring into the world this “King” to whom hath now been given a Cross for throne and thorns for Crown! Dost thou meditate eternal vengeance on us all? Hast thou sworn within thy soul that men shall worship what they once despised and pray to Him they slew? If so, such monstrous compensation ne’er was dreamed of—’tis a revenge more subtle than the fiercest tortures! Is it for wrath or love, Mary, that thou dost hold thy peace?’

Her sweet mouth trembled a little, but she did not speak,—her eyes were still uplifted as in prayer.

‘How can silence in aught avail thee?’ pursued

Barabbas impetuously—‘Lo, if the great God Invisible hath filled thee with His mystic Spirit, art thou not thereby made a creature marvellous?—a very queen of wonders?—and by thy very life dost thou not glorify thy sex and make it sacred and revered for evermore? Wherefore then hesitate to take full majesty and power upon thee? But if thou hast no miracle to tell, surely thou art a cruelty incarnate, for by thy dumb refusal to be true, thou mayest weave around the hapless world a web of error such as the ages never yet have seen! Think for a moment,—picture it!—shall wise men of the earth and conquerors and kings bow their proud heads before mere Woman and Child? The symbol of all Nature, in which there is no touch Divine but everything of common!—wilt thou make fools of tribes and nations, thou Mother of the so-called Christ, who art accredited with being Virgin still? No man hath touched thee, say the people,—yet thou hast a husband, and thou hadst a Son!—art thou thyself a Miracle?—or dost thou out of pleasure in an undeserved fame, suffer these wild things to be said of thee?’

Still she answered nothing. But bringing her eyes down from their rapturous survey of heaven, she fixed them on him with a grave regard in which there was something of mild rebuke as well as compassion.

‘I would not wilfully offend, or seem to offer thee reproach,’—he went on, vaguely troubled by her look—‘I know thou art a sorrowing Mother at this present time ; though to me thou hast an air of gladness rather than of grief. But I am only one of many who will clamour, ay, with tears and prayers, for an answer from thee,—I am a lonely, wretched sinner with a broken heart,—life is nothing to me, forms are nothing, the opinions of the world less than nothing,—I seek the truth, that I may rest thereon and find some comfort,—there are and will be thousands such as I. Could I believe, I would believe ; but an’ thou wilt not speak, thou leavest me in ignorance. If thy Son be born of the Spirit of God, then will I worship Him and thee,—but if He be no more than Man, then will I think of Him with pity as one noble and heroic who was foully slain, and of thee as patient woman sore afflicted, and there an end.

On thy word do I rely,—oh, thou must have a heart of steel or adamant, if still thou wilt not answer me!’

This time she stirred slightly, but she did not speak. Bending her head a little forward over the lilies she held, she gazed at him with an earnest and tender thoughtfulness,—and then — Barabbas started back amazed and terror-stricken. For behind her and around her a sudden great light shone,—a fiery halo, radiating to right and left like two glittering wings between which her tranquil and majestic figure held its place in queenly and serene unconsciousness. The unearthly glory palpitated with a thousand hues of delicate and changeful colour,—and Barabbas with a faint cry of wonderment, dropped again upon his knees.

‘God have mercy on me!’ he muttered, staring with dazzled eyes at the pulsating splendour, and the gentle figure that in the midst of those unearthly fires stood half framed in flowering lilies—‘God have mercy on me! Methought ’twas to a woman that I spoke,—this is an Angel!’

A soft surprise flitted over her face,—it was evident

that she herself was unaware of the mystic light that circled her as with a ring. It vanished even while Barabbas spoke, and he, kneeling in the dust and gazing upward, fancied his sight had surely been deceived. But now she moved,—and coming quite close up to him, looked him full and steadfastly in the eyes. A whisper light as the flutter of a leaf fell on his ears,

‘To-morrow!’

And with noiseless footsteps she passed him by, seeming to float aërially, like a spirit, upward on her way towards the Sepulchre between the hills. Barabbas, springing erect, ran recklessly a few steps after her, crying aloud—

‘Mary! Mary of Nazareth! Woman or angel, whatever thou art, judge me not wrongfully! I have but sought the truth, even as the world will seek it! —the truth of Him who was thy Son!’

She turned her head gently back towards him with an air of queenly patience.

‘To-morrow!’ she repeated, and her voice sounding like a soft chime, seemed carried through the air, over the quiet landscape into every nook and corner of

rock and field, bearing as a message to all creation the one word 'To-morrow!'

Then, gliding on, she disappeared.

Breathless and overcome with excitement, Barabbas flung himself down on the arid turf that edged the road, his senses all asworn and trembling.

'To-morrow!' he said—'Why—what shall to-morrow bring? Will her dead Son live again? Doth she also cherish this mad delusion? If He in truth doth rend the rocks asunder and arise, 'twill be sufficient proof of God for all; but such a miracle can never be, —'tis out of very Nature, yet I cannot but believe that some strange mystery doth invest the world,—some thought of God is working in its depths. For long long ages God hath well-nigh forgotten us,—doth He now remember at the very time when *we* forget? Hath He visited us in very truth, to be rejected? And if this should be so, what will be the purport of our doom? Ah me, we men are ever fools and blind,—and I the wretchedest fool of all, for methought I saw a heavenly radiance round yon woman of Nazareth, even as I deemed I saw the same in Pilate's

Hall around the figure of her Son—'twas but a dazzlement of sight and sense,—a weariness and faintness which quickly passed, and then the light had fled. How soon our fancies are deceived!—a sick man seeth visions, and thinks that they are real,—and I, weak with long imprisonment and fasting, fretted with griefs, and poisoned with despairs, am made the dupe of mine own feebleness. How full was I of strength once!—and now,—why the very look of this Mary of Nazareth doth easily unman me! To-morrow! I would that it were here! 'Tis growing late and dark—I will return to Melchior and tell him whither I am bound to-night,—then will I come back hither and take up my secret vigil till the marvellously-expected day shall dawn.'

He started running down the road towards Jerusalem, and as he entered the city gates, he met a detachment of soldiers, headed by Galbus, marching out. They were going to relieve the watch at the Sepulchre, and encamp themselves there for the night. He drew aside to let them pass, and as their burnished helmets and pikes went in a narrow glittering line up the road, the moon, large as

a golden shield, suddenly lifted herself above the city, gazing, as it were, over the hills in open wonderment, at the Divine Mystery hidden in the earth below.

XXXVI

‘**T**HY command must be obeyed,—nevertheless, Caiaphas, ’tis strange and unusual.’

The speaker was an elderly scribe,—a man with a pale lean intellectual face, and a high forehead, which just now was puckered in a puzzled frown. He was seated in the private audience-room of the high-priest, and the high-priest himself was majestically throned in a gilded chair opposite to him. Lamps were kindled,—the table was strewn with slips of parchment,—through the open casement the gardens of the palace could be seen richly illumined by the moon,—it was the evening of the Sabbath-day.

‘Strange and unusual as it may be,’ returned Caiaphas coldly, ‘it is my order. Thy business is not to question or dispute, but to perform the will

of those that are set over thee. Wherefore should'st thou and thy fellows chronicle the brief career and ignominious death of a mad blasphemer?'

'There is no answer to thy "wherefore," save the one,' replied the scribe, with a little smile,—'It is the custom, and hath been so for many ages, to faithfully set down all things within our records,—even to small items, whether concerning our evil men or good. The story of this fanatic of Nazareth is worthy to be written, if only to disprove all supernatural legends that are in rumour and connection with Him. Some things He taught were wise, and some were foolish, because impracticable,—and possibly His best suggestions may be traced to Egypt, and He be proved the merest echo of some ancient perished creed. I do confess unto thee, Caiaphas, I see no reason for the absolute omission of His name in circumstantial history.'

Caiaphas flushed a dark red, then grew pale, and grasped the projecting edges of his chair with both hands convulsively.

'Thou art a narrow pedant!'—he said angrily—
'Thou canst not see what I see. Knowest thou not

there is a change of feeling even now among the people?—that they bemoan their “Prophet’s” death, and weep, saying He wrought much good among them? Moreover that the end of Judas Iscariot hath moved them most profoundly, knowing that the unhappy youth did slay himself for pure remorse at having given the “Nazarene” over to the law? All this will grow upon report,—we, the Sanhedrim, shall be branded perchance, as murderers, and this crucified criminal be made a martyr. Wherefore I will not have Him mentioned in our records, Shebna,—let His name perish and His teachings be forgotten!—lest in the future, men should ask—“Who was this Man of Nazareth and wherefore was He slain?”’

‘They will ask that the more, maybe, if thou leave it unto rumour’—said Shebna drily, collecting his parchments together—‘If thou would’st make a man immortally renowned, let him be spoken of from mouth to mouth, and nothing of any written fact be found concerning him! Gossip hath whispered a man into a god ere now, when whole volumes of history would have failed to make him one. I tell

thee I would rather be talked of than written of,—
'tis the more lasting fame. If, in impassive language,
I should coldly pen the story of this Jesus of
Nazareth, and classify Him as a poor crazed creature
who gave Himself out to be the Son of God, and
was crucified for His blasphemy, no one, either in
the present or the future, would trouble their heads
further concerning Him.'

'If thou write one thing thou must write all,'
declared Caiaphas with irritation — 'Thou must
relate the terrors of the darkness and the earthquake ;
and what could'st thou make of the rending of the
Temple veil ?'

Shebna looked meditative.

'True,—these things were strange and terrifying,'
—he murmured — 'But after all—the heat of these
late days has been intense,—an earthquake and a
storm are natural disturbances which might occur
at any time,—and the Temple veil was probably rent
by an oblique flash of lightning. Thou art moved
from thy wonted calmness, Caiaphas, else thou
would'st see naught so particular in such events
that they should not be written.'

The high-priest rose, trembling with the interior force of an inexplicable fury.

‘Thou obstinate slave, thou shalt not write them!’ he cried vehemently—‘’Tis I who scan thy leaves,—’tis I who set my sign upon thy chronicle to warrant and approve its truth. Now if thou darest so much as write the name of Jesus of Nazareth in these present annals, I will cut thy parchment into shreds before thy face and depose thee from thine office!’

Shebna rose also, and stood staring at his irate superior in blank astonishment.

‘Anger not thyself thus needlessly, Caiaphas’—he said quietly—‘I argue not against thy order, which shall be fulfilled,—I simply seek to show thee ’tis in a manner unnecessary, as no fear can now be had of this troublous “Nazarene,” seeing He is dead. Nevertheless thou shalt have complete obedience; no word shall be inscribed upon our documents pertaining to this so-called “King of the Jews;” we will consign Him to oblivion.’

‘Ay!—so best!’ returned Caiaphas, recovering composure, and re-seating himself—‘For what the

pen does not write, the eye cannot read. Ye scribes are after all, the only powers of a land,—ye are more than kings,—for if ye chronicle not a victory, the world will never know 'twas gained,—and if ye speak not of a Man, who shall ever know that he existed? I believe not in the force of rumour as thou dost,—who doth credit mere garrulity?’

‘Why—every one!’ responded Shebna satirically—‘A man will doubt and seek to disprove the written facts of history,—but he will oft believe the first thing told him by his neighbour! And touching this matter, Caiaphas, thou must not forget that there are others who have known the “Nazarene” who may write some memorial of Him; His followers were many’——

‘Ignorant fools all and common folk’—retorted the high-priest—‘none of whom know the use of letters. A goodly company forsooth!—idle Galilean fishermen, hill-thieves, publicans, lepers and street-outcasts; such as these shall never write a line that can be read hereafter. Moreover, even if they did, what would their report be worth, if we, who make the Jewish annals, are silent?’

Shebna found no answer to this trenchant question, which indeed seemed to settle the matter. He had his own ideas upon the point,—every man has his own ideas upon every point,—but he was afraid to give them any further utterance. So he merely made a little deprecatory gesture of submission and assent, and, after a few more general remarks on ordinary subjects, he gathered up his parchments and humbly bowed himself out of his sacerdotal ruler's presence.

Left alone, Caiaphas sat for some moments in his chair absorbed in thought. His face was careworn,—his eyelids heavy with want of sleep.

‘How is it I am thus unmanned?’ he murmured wearily—‘Moved for the merest fancies!—troubled by the wandering humours of a tired brain! I cannot rid me of the memory of the Man of Nazareth,—there was a triumph in His dying eyes mingled with lightning-wrath that did appal my soul! But I have baffled Him!—there shall be no new creeds to conquer time; the one Jehovah shall suffice,—the one revengeful, blood-demanding, jealous God whose very name doth terrify the world! If God were Love

then would man grow too proud ;—shall a worm assume that the Divine hath care for it? An' such folly were believed in, we could not hold our mastery upon the people,—each wretched unit would appeal from us to God, and deem himself our independent equals. Ah, what a Sabbath this hath been!—how desolate in every moment, from the anguish and amazement of the morning when old Iscariot did seek me out with furious upbraidings, and frenzied clamour for his lost daughter, as if I knew whither she hath strayed! Would that I did know! Who is it that hath mouthed a scandal round her name and mine, and turned Iscariot's heart against me? The released Barabbas? Nay, he could guess nothing. I have been ever cautious,—and yet,—a whisper and a slander fly on swifter wings than light or wind, and who shall stay them? I must be on my guard,—and though I love Judith, I will not look upon her face for many days even when she is found, lest harm come of it.'

He rose, and moved to the open casement, from which a light wooden stairway led down into the shaded precincts of his luxurious private garden.

Leaning against the intertwined trellis-work, he looked out at the placid, star-strewn heavens with troubled and indifferent eyes.

‘’Tis the last night of the watch’—he said—‘ And to-morrow all suspense will cease. The counsellor of Arimathea hath kept his word,—he hath not visited the tomb since the burial,—likewise the followers of the “Nazarene” are scared, and reft of settled plan or purpose, wherefore, so far all is well. To-morrow we shall attest unto the people the falseness of the Prophet they believed in,—then, there will be no more cause for fear. So will the matter be forgotten ; these fanatics for truth are more troublous than seditious rebels ; open truth is most impolitic,—one cannot rule the world except by lies !’

He smiled a little at his own cynicism,—then started nervously, hearing a slight rustling in the thick foliage below his balcony. Moving from his indolent posture he bent forward to listen, and as he did so, two brilliant wild eyes peered up at him from the dusky shadows.

‘Caiaphas!’ and the whisper thrilled like the hiss of a snake through the silence,—‘Caiaphas!’

Seized with a chill terror, he stepped swiftly and noiselessly down the stairway, and bending back the bushes, gazed eagerly into what seemed a nest of leaves,—and there perceived the form of a woman crouched down on the ground as though seeking to hide herself,—a woman in draggled white garments, with a fair, strangely agonised face that smiled at him in a sort of forlorn joy as he discerned it among the sheltering shrubs and flowers. He uttered a smothered cry—

‘Judith!’

And half in rage, half in love, he dragged her from her hiding-place, and caught her up in his arms, looking about him in dread lest any one should see them, and trying to cover her with his own flowing mantle.

‘Judith!—Judith!’ he muttered, his heart beating heavily, the while he sought to put back from her brows all the tangled gold of her dishevelled hair—
‘What doest thou here? Where hast thou been? Knowest thou not that thy father hath sought thee all throughout the day with tears and heart-break? And why hast thou ventured hither thus alone?’

Rememberest thou not the scandal of tongues—the gossip of the city? Consider the folly of it!—if my wife saw thee,—if my servants spied thee!—oh, thou must not linger here one moment, Judith,—thou must go home;—come,—I myself will take thee through the private way, and naught will be suspected,—come!—there is no time to be lost if thou would'st silence slander.'

With unnatural violence she wrenched herself from his grasp and retreated step by step looking full at him. Leaves and brambles clung about her,—a spray of the scarlet cactus-blossom was twisted in her girdle, and against her breast she held some dark object which she appeared to cherish with a jealous care.

'Thou art Caiaphas!' she said, dreamily surveying him—'Thou art God's great high-priest who hath become a slave for love of me! I have watched for thee all day and have not found thee, though, up at a casement yonder I saw thy wedded spouse, the pale daughter of Annas, weeping. Did she weep for thee, thinkest thou?—if so 'twas strange. Who that is wise would shed tears for any man! Listen, Caiaphas,

—thou who dost exact obedience from all the people of Jerusalem,—the hour is come when thou must obey me!’

Alarmed at her wild look and manner, Caiaphas went towards her, trying again to take her in his arms,—but she still retreated, her eyes flashing with a fierceness that startled him.

‘What can I do for thee, Judith?’ he murmured, speaking as gently as he could, and hoping to soothe her by soft words—‘Thou knowest how willing I always am to give thee pleasure. Only I beseech thee, come with me out of this place, lest we be seen and spoken of’——

‘All the world may see,’—responded Judith with an air of triumph—‘All the world may hear! I care naught. What is the world to me, so long as Judas still is angry? Judas will not speak to me for wrath—he deems ’tis I did bring the “Nazarene” to death,—whereas ’tis thou!—thou only. And thou must tell him so,—thou must declare thy full part in the matter, for neither he nor I will bear the undeserved blame. He is at home sleeping; I told him thou hadst sworn to make him great and famous in

the land,—but he answered nothing. I promised I would bring him news,—come thou now and wake him—thou knowest not how fast he sleeps!—and tell him all,—tell him how thou didst teach me to persuade him to betray his friend the “Nazarene.” For though the “Nazarene” is dead, it seems He was not altogether evil,—and methinks ’tis pity He is dead, since Judas loved Him. I knew not that his love was such, or of so great a tenderness,—and now I suffer for my ignorance, for Judas will not pardon me, or look at me, or say as he was wont to say—“Fair sister, morning is fairer for thy presence!”—yea, he would oft speak so, smilingly, for I was beautiful,—the fairest woman in Judæa was I, till I grew old!’ Here she paused with a puzzled expression,—her own words seemed to frighten her,—but presently she went on, muttering to herself—

‘Till I grew old,—ay!—cruel age creeps on apace with us all,—we should not stint love, lest those we love be taken from us,—we must not wait too long, Judas and I, or we shall be buried in our graves ere we be friends. And once shut in that darkness we

shall never rise, not even on the waves of many tears !'

Her voice sank tremulously, — then suddenly it rang out clear and shrill.

'See!' she exclaimed wildly, — 'Thus died the King!'

And unclasping her hands from the object she had hugged so closely to her bosom, she held up a Cross, made of two small olive branches tied together with a strand of silk drawn out of her own girdle.

Caiaphas staggered back, struck speechless by her words and the swiftness of her action, and involuntarily he made a gesture of repugnance and offence. She saw it and sprang up to him, still brandishing the Cross before his eyes.

'Thus died the King!' she repeated with a kind of exultation — 'Slain by His own high-priest on the altar of the world!'

And with all the madness of her tortured brain lighting her looks as with fire, she stood transfigured into an unearthly loveliness that appalled while it fascinated her quondam lover, — and for one ab-

sorbing moment the twain confronted each other as though they were restless ghosts met by moonlight,—the Cross between them uplifted like a sign of parting,—a mystic barrier dividing them for ever!

XXXVII

IT was but an instant that they remained thus inert,—then, shaking off the amazement and fear that had held him motionless and dumb, Caiaphas seized the crazed girl in his arms and strove to snatch the Cross from her grasp. But she clung to it fiercely in an access of fever and frenzy; and with a swift lithe spring like that of a young leopardess, she again escaped from him and stood apart, eyeing him vengefully yet with a wan smile. Never had the proud priest been brought to such a verge of despair as now,—for what was he to do with this distracted creature, whose very presence in his private garden, if discovered, would bring scandal on his name, ruin his character, and degrade him from his lofty post! Even the words she uttered in her madness would betray the secret of their illicit loves,—the position

was wholly intolerable,—yet how was he to extricate himself from it! And why did she threaten him with the Cross?—she who had openly declared the intensity of her hate for the ‘Nazarene’? It might be merely the working of a delirious brain toying with chaotic contradictions, yet it troubled Caiaphas strangely. He advanced a step or two extending his hands in appeal.

— ‘Judith, come to me’—he said in a low tone of mingled coaxing and command,—‘Thou art ill,—distraught,—and perchance weary with wandering,—thou knowest not what thou sayest. Thy father waits for thee at home,—let me take thee to him now,—surely thou would’st not break his heart and mine? Come!’—and he ventured still nearer to her—‘Do I not love thee, Judith?—and wilt thou not trust thyself unto my tenderness?’

She looked at him strangely, her large eyes dilating with vague wonder.

‘Thy tenderness?’ she echoed. ‘What tenderness canst thou boast of, Caiaphas, unless it be that of the wolf for its prey? Speakest thou of love? Thou hast not loved me,—nor I thee,—moreover there is

no love left in all the world,—'tis dead, and thou, methinks, hast slain it.' Here she paused, passing one hand over her brow with a puzzled expression,—
 'I know not how the message came to me'—she continued murmuringly—'for Judas said nothing!'

'What message?' asked Caiaphas softly, drawing nearer to her, and resolving in his own mind that he would coax her away from the garden by degrees—
 'Tell me what it is that troubles thee.'

A faint smile crossed her lips.

'Nay, naught troubles me!' she said—'I have lived too long to grieve for bygone things. Look you, since my time the world is changed,—old days are passed for ever,—and Judæa is no more what it hath been. And of the message,—why, that was strange,—it told me that God lived and that Death was dead! Listen!' and with a swift capriciousness that startled him she flung herself into his arms and leaned her head against his breast, looking upwards into his face—'I have heard that now there is some curse upon us and that we shall never die! 'Tis bitter,—for I am tired of life, and so, surely, art thou. We have lived long enough; 'tis centuries since I

was young and since thou didst slay the "Nazarene." Rememberest thou His shining face in death?—methought He wore the lightning as a crown! But darkness came; and then I lost my brother Judas; Barabbas found him afterwards, and brought him home.'

'Barabbas!' muttered Caiaphas, the while he held Judith half roughly, half caressingly, in his embrace and sought to guide her steps imperceptibly towards the private gate leading out from the garden—'Barabbas is a murderer!'

'Then should'st thou be his friend'—said Judith—'for thou art murderer likewise! Hast thou not subtly slain the "Nazarene"? 'Twas aptly planned, Caiaphas,—men are as blind fools without reason, and none will think of blaming thee. And as for Judas,—Judas is not dead; he sleeps; if he indeed were dead the world should know that thou hadst killed him!'

Caiaphas frowned, and a sudden rage began to kindle itself in his blood against this woman he had once recklessly adored.

'Hold thy peace, Judith!' he said fiercely—'Thou

ravest!—thou art unlike thyself, else should I be wroth with thee. Talk not so wildly of the accurs'd "Nazarene," or it may be I shall hate thee even as ardently as I have loved. Thou thyself didst loathe this Prophet and desire His death; thou thyself didst mock Him ere He died; now, out of mere woman's wantonness thou pratest of Him almost as if His memory were dear to thee! Such folly passeth patience,—but thou'rt ill, and canst not comprehend thine own distraction,—why now!—what new fancy doth torment thee?'

For she suddenly withdrew herself from his arms, and, sighing piteously, began to play idly with a piece of coarse rope that dangled loosely from her girdle. Presently untying it, she held it out to him.

'Prithee take this, Caiaphas,'—she murmured plaintively—'Place it among the holy treasures of the Temple,—'twill serve! 'Twas round the throat of Judas,—see! his blood doth stain it here!'

He started back with a cry of horror. She came nearer still, with mute gestures praying him to accept the hideous gift she proffered.

'Wilt thou not receive it?' she asked, fixing her

wild eyes on his alarmed and pallid countenance—
‘Then art thou no true priest, for on the altar thou dost serve, there are the things of blood and sacrifice, and this should be amongst them. Lo!—it doth express the penitence of Judas,—he hath done wrong and his remorse is great; he prays for pardon! And I have told him for his comfort, that he hath not been in all to blame, for that it was thou,—thou and the creatures of thy craft, of whom I was one, that did destroy the “Nazarene.” And he is glad, I think,—for when I told him this, a light fell on him and he smiled,—for, ever did he hate the priests, and that they should outrage innocence, and crucify a god is no great wonder!’

Speechless with inward fury and despair, Caiaphas stood helplessly staring at her, while she in a kind of sad resignation, re-fastened the blood-stained cord at her own waist. Then she drew the roughly-made Cross from her bosom and smiled.

‘This is a strange charm!’ she said softly—‘It makes the old world new! In rays of light this same sign fell on Judas as he slept and seemed to give him peace. I found these olive-branches in Gethsemane,

and tied them thus together,—if it could comfort Judas, so shall it comfort me !’

And raising it to her lips she kissed it.

‘Judith—Judith!’ cried the high-priest desperately ;
‘Wilt thou kiss the symbol of ignoble death?’

‘Why not?’ said she—‘If Death thereby is dead? I told thee of the message,—’twas that God lived and Death was dead. We wept for Judas, believing he was gone from us into the grave for ever,—but now we know he lives, we shall be comforted. ’Tis a new wisdom we have learned, albeit there was something sweet in the old ignorance. For when we were sure that we should die,—it mattered little whether we lived well or ill,—a few years and all was at an end,—sins were not counted then,—but now, we dare not sin lest we be burdened with the memory of wrong through everlasting time. Methinks there is a misery in this joy of endless life!—what will become of thee, Caiaphas?—of me?—shall we forget our sins, thinkest thou?—or must we evermore remember?’

He met her large appealing eyes,—then gently advancing, encircled her with one arm.

‘Judith,—beloved Judith’—he whispered—‘As thou art dear to me, do not torment thyself and me with these wild fancies. Come,—I will not force thee homeward against thy will,—come within the palace, and I will hide thee where thou knowest of,—the secret nook where we have passed so many hours of love’——

‘Flatter not thyself I ever loved thee!’ she said with a returning flash of her former pride and scorn; ‘Men were my slaves, and thou the most abased of all!’ She paused, shuddering violently,—then went on in feeble tones,—‘But that was long ago,—when I was young; rememberest thou how fair I was?—with eyes like jewels and hair like gold?’

‘Thou art not changed, Judith’—murmured Caiaphas, pressing her to his heart with involuntary force and passion—‘Thou art as thou wert ever, the most beautiful of women!’

‘Thou dost mock me,’ she sighed, leaning against him languidly—‘But I heed not what thou sayest, as I never loved thee. No man did ever move me to a sorrow for his sake—not even poor Barabbas who in very truth did worship me. Out of his love he

slew Gabrias who had grown too boastful of my favour,—and for his crime he suffered long imprisonment,—yet I cared naught! If men are fools they needs must pay the price for folly.'

She roused herself, and shook back her long hair over her shoulders.

'Come!' she said—'Come and wake Judas. He has slept a long long while, and it will soon be morning.'

She moved swiftly and with an air of resolve over the grass, and Caiaphas, relieved that she seemed bent on departure, made an elaborate pretence of accompanying her. Her exquisite form, light, supple and stately, glided along before his eyes like some fair spectre, and the fascination of her beauty was such that he had much ado to keep himself from snatching her in his arms, all distraught as she was, and covering her with the last kisses of despairing love and farewell. But the fear of discovery held his passions in check,—and he was careful to walk beside her with an assumption of protecting dignity and compassion, so that if any chance beholder should spy him, he would be able to explain that he had found her wandering through his gardens in a state

of fever and distraction, and that he was merely fulfilling his duty as a priest in taking her back to her father's house.

Suddenly she stopped, and surveyed him with frowning suspicion.

'Thou wilt make full confession to Judas?' she demanded—'Thou wilt declare how it was *thy* scheme and thine alone that brought to death the "Nazarene"? Thou wilt absolve him from the sin that troubles him?—the sin whereunto we both persuaded him?'

He looked away from her.

'Be at peace, I pray thee, Judith'—he murmured evasively—'I will say what I can'——

'Nay, it is not what thou canst say but what thou must say!' cried Judith excitedly—'Thou *canst* say any lie,—thou *must* say the truth! Thou cruel priest! Thou shalt not darken my brother's name and fame by thy treachery,—thou shalt not screen thyself behind him in this history! *Thou*, the priest, didst hate the god, if any god there was within thy Victim,—and thou didst slay Him. The very people would have set Him free hadst thou not bidden me cry out "Crucify Him" to keep them in their venge-

ful humour. I tell thee thou shalt confess this thing,—
I will not go from hence till thou dost promise me,—
Judas waits for us at home,—swear to me thou wilt
tell him all!’

Driven to desperation, and bethinking himself that
after all, Judas was dead, though his distraught sister
would not realise it, Caiaphas answered hurriedly,

‘Be it as thou wilt, Judith. I swear!’

She peered at him distrustfully, her eyes glittering
with a sparkle of malevolence.

‘I do not believe thee!’ she said deliberately—
‘Thou canst so aptly play the spy and traitor that
thou art not to be trusted! If thou wilt be true to
thy word for once, swear to me by this!’

And she again held up the Cross before him. At
the suddenly renewed sight of it such a fury seized
him that for the moment he lost all control over
himself.

‘Darest thou thus taunt me!’ he cried—‘Thou art
not Judith Iscariot, but some devil in her aspect!
Crazed fool or fiend, thou shalt no longer provoke
me!’

And closing with her, he endeavoured to violently

wrench the offending Symbol from her hands, the while she fought for its retention with the breathless rage and tenacity of some savage creature, till in the struggle, the Cross bent and snapped in twain. At this, she gave a cry of despair, and snatching her dagger from her girdle, sprang upon her priestly lover and stabbed him with a furious thrust that sent him reeling. Staggering backward, he fell senseless on the ground, the blood gushing freely from his wound, and she, stooping over him, stared at her own work in a dazed, wild wonder. Then, dropping both the dagger and the fragments of the Cross upon his bleeding body, she rushed away in frantic fear, and fled, like a phantom of the moon and shadow, out into the brooding silence of the night.

XXXVIII

MEANTIME, around the holy Sepulchre the guard kept vigilant watch. Behind it and on either side, armed men paced evenly to and fro,—in front of it the fierce and martial Galbus stood at the doorway of his tent, leaning upon his tall lance and surveying the scenery around him. There was a singular soft freshness in the air,—a bland and soothing perfume, as though the breathings of a thousand flowers were floating over the land on the drifting wings of a lazy southern wind. The moon, airily rolling through the clear ether like a golden bubble, cast long mellow beams upon the piled-up glistening rocks of the sacred tomb and the burnt brown turf that sparsely covered the little hills,—the stars, dimmed in lustre by this greater radiance, seemed wandering through a labyrinth of light mist

and rainbow-tinted-haloes. A great calm prevailed ; the small pennon on the top of Galbus's tent, hung limp without the faintest flutter ; a bush of myrtle close by had such a stillness in its leaves that it looked like an artificial semblance of itself, deftly carved and coloured by some ingenious human craftsman. Not a sound could be heard, save the muffled tread of the soldiers' sandalled feet, and Galbus, somewhat oppressed by the silence as well as by the heat of the atmosphere, began to grumble to himself *sotto-voce* for want of anything better to do.

‘How they will laugh in Rome at this folly!’ he said—‘Did any one ever dream the like! I, Galbus, a man who hath seen war,—one who hath counted his ten corpses to a round of fighting, set here to watch that a corpse escape not! By the gods! The suspicious imagining of these Jew priests doth pass all patience ; they deem that the poor, wild, half-starved-looking followers of the crucified “Nazarene” will steal His body, forgetting that it would need at least half-a-dozen men of stout sinew to move so much as yonder stone that closeth up the grave ; and even then ’twould be displaced with difficulty. Well,

well! The night will soon be gone and this crazy business finished; 'twill be as I say, matter for laughter in Rome when I tell them how I and fourteen picked men out of my hundred, were forced to guard a poor dead body lest it should rise again!'

Lifting his helmet to cool his brows, he rubbed his eyes and yawned.

'Were I to sleep now,' he soliloquised—'yon crafty Caiaphas, discovering it, would manage so as to lose me my post. Was ever such a petulant priest! and subtle therewithal, even as Volpian, he who doth serve Diana's altar in Rome, and out of purest zeal, doth ravish many a fair virgin! They're all alike, these so-called "holy" men,—no son of mine shall ever be a priest I warrant! This was the crime of the dead "Nazarene" from all that I can gather,—He sought to do away with priestcraft,—a mighty task, Jove knoweth! And now I call to mind yon aged soul who prayed here in the morning for his "little maid"—the feeble fool!—he met me in the town yonder, a-shaking like a wind-blown reed for joy—"Good sir!" cried he, "the little maid is saved!" And then he swore, with tears, that the fever left her

at the very hour he made petition to yon sealed-up tomb! Heaven help him for a crazed frail creature!—the superstitions of these country folk are strange and sometimes devilish,—nevertheless I hear on all sides that this young Prophet out of Nazareth was a good man, and pitiful. By my soul!’ and he yawned again—‘Tis a night for peaceful slumber, yet I may not drowse, lest while I close my eyes, unheard-of powers disturb the air’——

‘Galbus! Galbus! Hist! Galbus!’

‘What now?’ he answered sharply, as the soldier who had thus called him hurriedly approached—‘Why leavest thou thy post?’

Fidius is there,’—said the young man apologetically, as he paused to salute his superior officer—‘I called thee so that thou should’st listen.’

‘Listen? To what?’ demanded Galbus impatiently; ‘There is no sound but thy gruff voice and mine. Thou art a dreamer, Maximus,—thy mother told me so.’

Maximus, a tall stalwart Roman of handsome face and figure, smiled deprecatingly, but at the same time held up his hand to enjoin attention.

‘Nay, I dream not, Galbus ; I pray thee hearken !—
'tis some unknown bird that sings !’

The grim centurion stared at him, half in indignation, half in surprise.

‘Bird !’ he echoed—‘There are few birds in Palestine I warrant thee !—and what there are must be as dry-throated as the locusts in the corn.’

‘Hush !’ whispered Maximus—‘It begins again !’

And before Galbus could utter another word, a silvery ripple of music floated towards him,—a flow of gurgling notes, full and pure and honey-sweet,—notes such as no nightingale in moonlit woods ever sang, even in the most ardent time of nesting tenderness. The amazement on the centurion’s face deepened into rapture,—grasping his lance firmly with both hands he leaned against it, silently listening, and lost in wonder. The hidden bird sang on ; and it seemed as if some wondrous meaning was enclosed within its song, for the fascination of striving to follow the thread of its rich rhythm intensified with every sweet tone that sounded on the still air. All at once it ceased,—but its broken melody was taken up by a companion singer who

had evidently found a resting-place within the bush of myrtle that grew close by the sacred tomb. This second bird warbled even more rapturously than the first,—and while the clear torrent of tune poured forth passion to the silence, another soldier hastily advanced, eagerly exclaiming,

‘Galbus! Hearest thou this music?’

Galbus started, . . . there was a strange moisture in his eyes,—he had been lost in thought, and the face of his little daughter who had died when barely three years of age had flitted, or appeared to flit, for a moment between him and the glittering moon. The sight of a second man wandering away from his post served as a timely check to his emotions, and he struck the butt-end of his lance into the ground with a well-affected air of anger.

‘By the gods! Canst thou not hear a bird sing, without running hither like a prattling babe to tell me of it? Back to thy place, and quickly! Knowest thou not that we are bound to keep guard to-night with more than usual circumspection?—and shall we all be scattered like sheep at the twittering of birds? Maximus, be ashamed! Thou hast set a

bad example ; get hence, thou too,—and pay closer heed to thy duty,—who knows whether there may not be sorcery in this singing !’

A flush of vexation mounted to the brows of the young Maximus at the implied reproach, but he said nothing, and immediately retired. His post was not more than three or four yards from where Galbus stood ; and feeling somewhat weary, he sat down inside one of the tents to rest. There, leaning his head on his hand, he still listened to the sweet chirping voices that now sounded louder and clearer than ever. The other soldier also went back to his place, crestfallen, but obedient, and Galbus was left to himself, to gaze at the sailing moon, and drink in the magical tenderness of the chorus that floated round and round the quiet sepulchre of the Crucified in ever-widening circles of delicious harmony. And presently,—all the men on guard, rather than disturb such music by the clank of their armour or the tread of their sandals, sat within their tents, all silent,—all enthralled into languid peace by a mystic and imperceptibly deepening spell.

‘’Tis wondrous,—I will not deny it,’—murmured

Galbus after a while, seating himself also just within the door of his own small pavilion, and composing himself to fresh attention—‘First it was one bird, and now it seems as if there were twenty. Never did I hear such singing in Palestine! They may be birds of passage,—yet from whence would they come, and whither would they speed? And wherefore should they choose such a resting-place as these arid hills?—or such an hour for tuning up their songs as now?’

He sat absorbed, his mind soothed and satisfied by the delicate pipings of the invisible little throats that seemed as if they must burst with the fulness and delight of song.

And, farther off, there was another listener to the marvellous music,—one whose presence there that night was totally unsuspected by the guard. This was Barabbas. He lay unseen in the hollow of the hill behind the sepulchre, and heard the melting melody in rapt wonder. He knew the country round Jerusalem well,—he had known it from boyhood; but he had never heard sweet singing-birds till now. He could not understand it; it was to him much

more than what was called a miracle. The air was so very still,—the little trees were so motionless,—the very blades of stunted grass so stiffly upright, that the rippling notes seemed produced by some power unearthly. It might have been the liquid sounding of fairy flutes in the air, or dainty *arpeggi* struck from golden strings, only that the voices were most truly bird-like, full of nightingale-warbles and luscious trills. And by and by the same sense of peace and happiness stole on the tired soul of Barabbas as had come to the war-worn centurion on guard; gradually he grew lost in a sort of blissful dream, scarcely knowing what he thought or what he felt. When he had told Melchior of his intent to keep secret vigil near the tomb of the ‘Nazarene,’ that incomprehensible personage had looked grave, but had not forbidden him, only saying gently—

‘Take heed, lest when the Master cometh, He find you sleeping!’

This was a strange saying!—nevertheless here he was; determined not to sleep, but to remain broadly, fully awake, so that he might be able to testify in plain language as to what happened,—if indeed any-

thing should happen. Yet he was conscious of a drowsiness in the air,—of a lulling rhythm in the dulcet singing of the unseen feathered choir, that was inexpressibly soothing,—and he found difficulty in resisting the tempting languor that by slow and insensible degrees began to take possession of him. He tried to think of various practical things,—of the terror which had evidently seized the disciples of the dead ‘Nazarene,’ causing them to hide themselves in the lowest quarters of the city, and entirely give up any attempt to visit the guarded tomb of their perished Master,—of the extreme precautions of Caiaphas,—of the continued indisposition of Pilate,—of the suicide of Judas Iscariot,—then,—of the strayed Judith, . . . and here his mind recoiled upon itself as it were, with inward trembling. The thought of her was singularly depressing and unwelcome to him just at this moment,—he could not have told why, but so it was. It would be well for her if she were dead, he told himself sorrowfully,—better for her a thousand times,—better even for him. He would be glad to die, he thought,—that curious sense of detachment from earth and utter indifference to existence

had come to him, as it comes at certain epochs to us all,—when death with its darkness and deep silence, seems a sweeter, kinder, and more valuable boon than life.

He flung himself back full length in the turfy hollow and lay staring up at the stars and the moon. How those birds sang! How sweetly the fragrant wind breathed through the dried and faintly rustling grass! He stretched his arms out on either side of him with a sigh of lazy comfort,—and presently took a singular pleasure in observing that he had unconsciously assumed the attitude of one preparing to be crucified. He began to wonder idly how it would feel if huge nails were driven forcibly through his open palms, as had been done to his former comrade Hanan, and to Him they called the 'Nazarene.' Involuntarily closing his fingers on a tuft of grass, he suddenly felt that he had grasped something foreign to the soil, and looking to see what he held, he found he had pulled up a small bell-shaped blossom, pure white and delicately scented. He examined it attentively; he had never beheld its like before. But there was such a listless heaviness upon him that he

had no desire to lift himself up^e and search for more such flowers,—had he done so he would have witnessed a fairy-like and strange spectacle. For, from base to summit of the hills around, the brown turf was rapidly being covered up out of sight by masses of snowy bloom, breaking upwards like white foam!—thousands and thousands of blossoms started from the trembling earth,—that earth which panted with the knowledge of a Divine Redemption, and yearned to pay its glorious Master homage. And the hidden birds sang on,—sweetly, passionately, triumphantly; and round the holy sepulchre the soldiers nodded on the benches within their tents, half sleeping, wholly dreaming,—of love, of home, of kindred, of dear and precious memories such as never were expressed or written. Only the young Maximus forced himself to keep wide awake; the reproach of Galbus had stung his military pride, and he resolved to be more than doubly vigilant in his watch. So, though he longed to fling himself down upon the turf and rest a while, he resisted the oppression that lay heavy upon him, and rising, walked slowly to and fro, glancing now and then dubiously and half compassionately at his

drowsing comrades. He was not inclined to rouse them,—he meant to win some special praise for keener vigilance than they. His tall figure cast a gigantic shadow in the moonlight, as he paced leisurely up and down, and he watched this spectral exaggeration of himself in a curiously philosophic mood. What kind of a world would it have been, he thought, if the shadow of man had never fallen upon it? Dreamily pondering this wholly unanswerable question, he was all at once startled out of his reverie by a great light that fell in one, keen, dazzling flash straight from the heavens, sweeping the shadow of himself into naught, and playing about him in running, intertwisting rings of flame. Amazed, he looked up, and saw in the east a vivid rose-red radiance that widened out swiftly even as he gazed upon it,—while across the ruddy tint there appeared bright perpendicular bars of gold, like a vision of the gates of Eden. Shaking off the strange stupor that numbed his senses and held him for a moment inert, he sprang quickly to the side of Galbus, who, seated in his tent and leaning against his spear was all but fast asleep.

‘Galbus! Galbus!’

Galbus at once leaped fiercely erect with a defiant look, as though threatening with death any one who should presume to say that he had slumbered.

Maximus, trembling, seized him by the arm, and half in terror, half in expectancy, pointed eastward.

‘Galbus, the watch is ended! Lo,—the Dawn!’

XXXIX

GALBUS stared wildly with dazzled eyes.

'The dawn? . . . the dawn, sayest thou?' he muttered thickly—'Nay, nay! . . . never did dawn break thus strangely!' And his bronzed features grew pale. ''Tis fire! . . . or lightning! . . . Maximus, —Maximus,—my sight fails me, . . . yonder glory hath a marvel in it! . . . 'tis blinding to the sight! Ye gods,—look! . . . look there!'

Dropping his lance, he stretched out both arms towards the sky, losing breath and utterance in the excess of his amazement and fear; Maximus, speechless too, clung to him, gazing with equal dread and wonder at the terrific splendour that cast its glory round them and illumined all the visible earth. For now, out of the burning centre of that eastward blaze of crimson, there rose up a double fan-shaped, diamond-

shining whiteness, as of huge unfolding misty wings, —towering aloft, these aerial pinions extended towards the south ; while from the north, another exactly similar and equally dazzling Appearance made itself visible against a gleaming background of smooth gold. Then,—all at once, with a sudden sharp tremor the earth shook ; and there came the impetuous rush and whirl of a mighty wind that bent the trees like blades of grass and seemed to scatter the very stars in heaven like a swarm of frightened fireflies ; and with the surging sound that mysterious Winged Whiteness began to sweep forward at the swift and flashing pace of lightning !

‘ Galbus, Galbus ! ’ gasped Maximus, falling down and covering his face in a paroxysm of fear—‘ Kneel —kneel !—for we must die ! The gods descend ! Behold them where they come ! ’

With straining eyeballs and panting breath, Galbus gave one upward frenzied stare, . . . his swooning senses could but just dimly realise that surely the powers of Heaven were upon him, and that death, sudden and relentless, must be his inevitable fate. How could mortal strength uphold mortal man at

such a sight! . . . How could human vision bear the fearful dazzlement and marvel of what he, for one dizzy second, gazed upon! . . . Two majestic Shapes,—the transfigured and ethereal semblances of a glorified humanity, flashing with a brightness celestial, a splendour invincible, grew up, as it were, in stately stature out of the molten-golden east; and seemingly impelled by wind and fire, floated meteor-like through space, and together silently descended at the closed tomb of the 'Nazarene'! One of these supernal Beings appeared robed in white fire,—his lustrous countenance, gleaming as with lightning, shone from between pale glistening locks of gold, on which a halo rested, like a crown. As this glorious Messenger touched earth, the ground rocked, and the divided air recoiled upon itself with a roll and roar of thunder. Prone on the turf Galbus fell senseless and dead for the time being, . . . and in that one thrilling moment no living man beheld the splendid declaration of the Divine, save one,—Barabbas. He, when the great light flashed around him, when the whirlwind and the thunder swept surgingly across the hills, had crawled forth from his hiding-place; and now, crouching on the

grass in a dumb agony of trembling, stared at the supernatural sight, unforbidden for a brief space, too dazzled to realise all its meaning and majesty, and believing that he must be wrapt in some wild and glittering dream, . . . when, even as he looked, a sharp brilliance, like the cutting sting of a lash, struck him across the eyes, — and he, too, swayed blindly back and plunged into the darkness of a swoon that was like death.

Quivering to its deepest underground fibres, the earth supported the glowing forms of God's ethereal Envoys;—together they stood, the fire of their white transparent wings quenching the silver reflex of the sinking moon,—their radiant faces turned towards the closed sepulchre wherein their Master slept. Again the great wind rushed in resonant harp-like chords through heaven,—again the ground rocked and trembled, and again the thunder sounded its deep trump of wakening eloquence! And all the mystic voices of the air seemed whispering the great Truths about to be made manifest;—‘Death is dead; Life is Eternal! God is Love!’

Like kindled flames upon the sombre soil, the

Angels of the Message waited side by side, their heavenly eyes luminous with Divine rapture, and the light upon their brows flinging glorious reflections far up in twinkling points of radiance to the vanishing stars. The dawn was near,—the strong suspense of Nature was at its keenest pitch,—it seemed as if what we know of Creation could endure the strain no more,—as if the world, the sun, the moon, the visible planets, must melt away like drops of dew in the burning fervour of so vast an ecstasy of expectation! The dawn was near!—that Dawn which would be like no other dawn that ever heralded a day,—the dawn of all the hope, the joy, the faith, the love that waits upon the promised certainty of life immortal; that priceless promise given to those who are willing to accept it without question or mistrust; and who, loving their fellow-men better than themselves, in God and for God, touch heavenly ecstasy while yet on earth.

And now a deep silence reigned. All the soldiers of the watch lay stretched on the ground unconscious, as though struck dead by lightning,—the previous mysterious singing of the birds had ceased; and only

the lambent quivering of the wing-like glory surrounding the angelic Messengers, seemed to make an expressed though unheard sound as of music. Then, . . . in the midst of the solemn hush, . . . the great stone that closed the tomb of the Crucified trembled, . . . and was suddenly thrust back like a door flung open in haste for the exit of a King, . . . and lo! . . . a Third great Angel joined the other two! Sublimely beautiful He stood,—the Risen from the Dead! . . . gazing with loving eyes on all the swooning, sleeping world of men; the same grand Countenance that had made a glory of the Cross of Death, now, with a smile of victory, gave poor Humanity the gift of everlasting Life! The grateful skies brightened above Him, — earth exhaled its choicest odours through every little pulsing leaf and scented herb and tree; Nature exulted in the touch of things eternal,—and the dim pearly light of the gradually breaking morn fell on all things with a greater purity, a brighter blessedness than ever had invested it before. The Man Crucified and Risen, now manifested in Himself the mystic mingling of God in Humanity; and taught that for the powers of

the Soul set free from sin, there is no limit, no vanquishment, no end! No more eternal partings for those who on the earth should learn to love each other, — no more the withering hopelessness of despair,—the only 'death' now possible to redeemed mortality being 'the bondage of sin' voluntarily entered into and preferred by the unbelieving. And from this self-wrought, self-chosen doom not even a God can save.

Reverently bent were the radiant heads of the angelic Beings that had descended in full flight from Heaven; but He who stood erect between them, tall and majestically fair, looked upward once; then straight across the silent landscape; and, stretching forth His hands, seemed by the tenderness of the gesture to place His benediction on the world. A light grey mist was rising incense-like from the eastern edge of the horizon,—the crimson glory lately flaming there had paled into the faint pink of a blush rose-petal, and a soothing shadow stole imperceptibly over the scene, toning down into silver lines the departing rays of that supernatural splendour which had been like the beginning of a

new creation. Slowly, very slowly, the transcendent brightness round the form of the Risen Redeemer faded into air,—His Human Shape became more and more clearly defined, till almost He looked with the same aspect He had worn in the Hall of Pilate, when man's law had condemned Him to suffer man's death. Only there rested a sublimer glory on His countenance: the expression of a power omnipotent; a beauty terrific; a knowledge supernal that made Him wonderful even in the sight of His serving-angels of Heaven. To them presently His high command was silently expressed, for one bright Being vanished like a melting cloud within the opened sepulchre,—and the other, moving to the great stone of burial that had been rolled away, rested upon it, a shining Wonder, clothed in white wings.

Meanwhile He who had proved Death to be but another name for Life, began to pace pensively to and fro among the tangled shrubs and vines that in their careless and untrained luxuriance gave to the otherwise dreary burial-spot, something of a wild beauty. He moved as though He loved the world;

even to the very blades of grass His feet passed gently over; the leaves upon their branches bent towards Him as taking health and joy from His fair Presence, and fearlessly seeking His blessing. And ever as He moved, His aspect grew more human; out of the secret depths of space He seemed to clothe Himself anew with the fleeting semblance of mortality. Now and again He paused, and gazed at the senseless forms around Him of all those who had been set to guard His resting-place, and then the mystic watchfulness and deep compassion of His eyes reflected the vast, impersonal and changeless love which emanates from the Divine alone. Passing slowly among them with noiseless tread, the while they lay inert, unconscious of His nearness (even as we, at this time, in our blind and selfish torpor are unconscious or indifferent when He comes), He presently approached the spot where the sinner who should, in justice, have suffered instead of Him had fallen as one dead,—Barabbas. Stretched flat upon the turf, with arms extended on either side of him as though the earth were a cross and he the criminal nailed to it, his dark countenance and closed eyes

fronting the sky, the erring, passion-haunted man was ready for some punishment, some instant withering doom. Stained with the crime of murder, branded as a thief, and full of a thousand follies and germinating sins, what had he done that he should merit all the pity and the pardon that flashed upon him like a glory from the tender glance of the risen Christ! What had he done?—why, nothing in truth,—he could, he would do nothing worthy. Only a thought of love had been in his dark soul for the sorrows of the Man Crucified,—and he had shed tears for the sufferings of the holiest Innocence that ever was maligned by human malice; he had longed to understand, to know, to serve this splendid Ideal of the Ages,—and—this was all. Yet this sufficed to bring the glorious Master to his side; though as that Master looked upon him, a shade of sorrow darkened the beautiful Divine brows,—the shadow and presentiment of what was yet to be. There, made visible in Barabbas, was the symbol of the animal man, blindly conscious of the creative Soul of the Universe, yet doubting all manifestations of that Soul, and thrusting his own narrow fears and scepticisms forward

to obstruct and bar out the very presence of the Eternal. And beside him, in strange contrast, stood the pure and stately embodiment of the Spirit of God made human,—the example of a perfect manhood, the emblem of life, and the symbol of Genius, which slandered and tortured and slain and buried, rises eternally triumphant over evil and death.

A faint sigh stirred the air,—the sigh of One who knew that by the pitiless will of Man, He should be wronged and spiritually re-crucified for ages; and then the risen Light of the World turned away and glided among the little trembling trees, His figure gradually becoming a mere misty outline, vague and undefinable as though it were the floating shadow of a dream. Two hours had yet to pass ere the sun would rise,—meanwhile a fragrant freshness sweetened the breaking dawn, and all Nature remained absorbed in a sacred silence of enraptured worship, conscious that the Master and Lord of Life was now, as once before in oldest time, 'walking in His garden in the cool of the day'!

XL

SHUDDERING in every limb with pain and chilly fear, Barabbas presently awoke from his long swoon. Something had happened,—but what? He rubbed his aching eyes and lifted himself into a half-sitting posture, looking uneasily about him. Dully he considered his position; he was in his old place on the hill behind the sepulchre; the place where he had watched, until—until, as it seemed, a strange thing had chanced to him which now he could not quite remember. A dream had dazzled him, he thought, and scared his senses from him. He imagined he had seen two supernatural Shapes, formed as it were, out of floating pyramidal fire, descending near the tomb of the ‘Nazarene,’—but ere he had had time to look upon them straightly, a dizziness had seized him, and he saw no more.

'Take heed, lest when the Master cometh, He find you sleeping.' These words, spoken to him by the man Melchior, ere he had started to take up his self-imposed vigil, recurred to him unpleasantly now and troubled him; had he slept after all? And had the 'Master' come?

Rising slowly to his feet, he gazed from left to right of him; all things seemed the same. The tents of the soldiers on guard gleamed whitely in the pallid grey of dawn; the men had evidently not yet left their posts, though the night was fully past and the sense of sunrise was in the air. There was something peculiarly beautiful in the clear freshness of that wondrous morning. The world appeared new; as though it were conscious of the victory of the Soul over Death; and Barabbas, pained and puzzled though he was, felt the comfort of the deep tranquillity and restfulness around him. Dismissing his forebodings, he began to think he would boldly go to the sepulchre, and seek out Galbus to ask him how he had fared during the night,—then, on further reflection he hesitated, for if, after all, anything unusual should have occurred, he, Barabbas, might be suspected of

having had some share in it. While he stood thus irresolute, soft approaching steps startled him, and he quickly crouched down again behind a bend of the hill where he could see without being seen. Three women were coming up the road from the city,—the foremost one of the group was Mary Magdalene. Her head was bent sorrowfully; she moved listlessly and with an air of deep melancholy,—in her hands she carried flowers and sweet herbs, and delicate odours seemed to be exhaled from her garments as she moved. She and her companions exchanged no words; they all seemed stricken by the silence of an absolute despair. As they passed by the spot where Barabbas lay concealed, he lifted himself cautiously up to look after them, and wondered whether it would be safe or prudent to follow in their track. They appeared like misty phantoms floating along in the pearly hues of dawn; but he could see the golden glint of the Magdalen's hair flash like a sunbeam as she turned round by the shelving rocks of the sepulchre and disappeared. Poor, wistful, woebegone women, he thought!—they went to visit the dead,—the dead 'Man of Nazareth' whose wondrous smile

of love and pardon would never lighten their lonely lives again! Alas, for them, that in their clinging faithfulness, they should of sad and morbid choice renew their useless anguish by gazing once more upon the cruelly unflinching stillness and rigidity of the frozen monster Death, who never yields his once-gained prey for all the clamour of tender women's tears! So Barabbas mused compassionately, though his mind was swayed between doubt and fear whenever the recollection of his last night's 'dream' occurred to him,—that dream of angels which had blinded him with its excess of light.

Suddenly a piercing cry echoed through the silence, and two of the women came rushing back along the road in a panic of haste and fear. Throwing personal precaution to the winds, Barabbas sprang out from his hiding-place and confronted them.

'What now?' he demanded excitedly—'Speak—speak! What news?'

'He is risen! He is risen!' they cried, their eager voices struggling together for quickest utterance—

‘The seals of the tomb are broken,—the stone is rolled away,—and an Angel of the Lord is there! He is risen!’

Trembling with agitation, Barabbas thrust himself in their path as they strove to run past him.

‘Ye are mad!—surely ye are mad!’ he exclaimed; ‘Whither go ye?’

Impatiently they pointed towards the city.

‘Yonder!—to summon His disciples. Go! see the place where the Lord lay! None shall hinder thee; the keepers are as dead men! He is risen!—He is risen!’

And they pursued their swift course down the road as though impelled along by invisible wings.

Barabbas waited no longer, but ran impetuously at a headlong pace towards the sepulchre, every pulse in his body beating with feverish excitement. As he approached it, however, he involuntarily slackened his speed, stricken with wonder and affright at the strange scene. It was true!—the ‘keepers’ were ‘as dead men;’—Galbus and his band of soldiers

were all prone upon the ground like corpses flung there after a battle,—and what had seemed the impossible had been effected, in that the tomb was open, and the huge stone rolled away. And the Angel of whom the women spoke? Barabbas could see no Angel,—though he fancied that on the displaced stone, there glittered a singular bright light that made it shine like a block of polished gold. He rubbed his eyes dubiously: such marvels made him distrust the evidence of his own senses,—yet, there at the entrance of the opened tomb, lay something human,—something in distress,—the fallen form of the Magdalen, who seemed to have swooned. Barabbas would have approached her,—but an invisible force held him to the spot where he stood, smitten with strong awe and fear, and he dared not advance a step. And while he yet looked, he saw her move; and presently she rose up feebly, and with tottering steps stooped towards the sepulchre as though to enter in. Then all suddenly a calm Voice sounded on the deep silence,—a Voice of pure unearthly music sweeter than all we know of sweetest sound:

‘ *Woman, why weepst thou ?* ’

Thrilled with amazement and dread, Barabbas saw her sink upon her knees and raise her hands in passionate supplication.

‘ *Because,* ’ . . . and her trembling accents were broken by low weeping—‘ *they have taken away my Lord, and I know not where they have laid Him !* ’

A deep silence followed. The golden glory vanished from the stone that had been rolled away,—and another light began to shine—the first heraldic blazon of the rising sun. Unanswered and un comforted, the Magdalen hid her face in her clasped hands,—she had seen a vision of angels ; one at the head and one at the foot of the sepulchred niche where her Master had reposed in temporary death,—but what are all the angels in paradise worth to Love, if the Beloved be missing ? And stricken to the heart by despair and loneliness, she wept on, crouched at the entrance of the vacant tomb, her slight frame shaken by the tempest of her grief for the loss of the dead outward Semblance of Him whose pardon had reclaimed her life. But while she thus gave way to

the abandonment of sorrow, the enchained spectator of the scene, Barabbas, suddenly became conscious of a majesty and a terror filling the air; some great Splendour suggested itself vaguely like the thunderous thrill of the atmosphere preceding a storm. Faint and trembling he felt rather than saw, that a Figure was advancing from the sheltering shadow of the few trees that surrounded the sepulchre, . . . and slowly, slowly, in a mortal anguish of dread and expectation he turned,—and beheld in very truth, in very life, . . . the ‘Nazarene’! He, the Crucified, the Slain and Buried, stood there living; looking even as He looked before He had been nailed upon the Cross to die,—the same, the same in every feature, as human-seeming as Humanity itself, save that His vesture appeared woven out of glittering mist and fire! Breathless, giddy, and unable to articulate the feeblest cry, Barabbas stared upon Him, fully recognising the fair beauty of His countenance, the lustrous love and wisdom of His eyes, yet afraid to believe this Miracle a Truth. In aerial stateliness He passed by without sound, and glided, a Kingly Spirit in mortal aspect, to where the Magdalen wept

alone. There, pausing, He spoke, His dulcet accents charming the stillness to responsive pulsations of harmony.

'Woman, why weepest thou? Whom seekest thou?'

Moving restlessly, she half turned round and gazed vaguely up through the obscuring cloud of her tears and falling hair, only seeing that some one, she knew not who, stood beside her, questioning her as to her cause of grief. And with a shuddering sigh she drooped her head again and answered wearily—

'Sir, if thou hast borne Him hence, tell me where thou hast laid Him, and I will take Him away.'

'Mary!'

The sweet name, set among holy things for ever, fell softly on the silence like a song.

She started,—sprang up to her full height,—gazed wildly, . . . wonderingly, . . . incredulously, . . . then,—with a shriek of joy that seemed to echo to the very skies, she fell on her knees.

'Master! Master!' she cried, and stretched

forth her hands towards that Risen Saviour whose living Presence was the sign of rescue for the world.

But now a light celestial environed Him,—the earth trembled where He stood,—and with a warning yet gentle gesture He motioned her away.

'Touch Me not; for I am but newly risen!'

And as He said these words a splendour flashed about His form like fire,—He lifted His eyes to the brightening heavens, and all the radiant hues of morning seemed to float around Him and melt above Him in rings upon rings of ever-widening lustre, while the arrowy beams of the sun, shooting upwards through the clear ether, formed as it were upon the edge of the horizon a great Crown of the Universe for the glory of Him alone. Divinity invested Him with an unspeakable grandeur and majesty; and when His voice again sounded through space, it rang with the clarion note of supreme command and resistless power.

'Go!'—and extending His arms, He appeared to indicate by one royal, all-comprehensive gesture His sovereignty over things visible and invisible;

'Go, tell My brethren that I ascend! Unto My Father and your Father,—unto My God and your God!'

One thrilling instant more His creatures looked upon Him,—the Magdalen in rapt and speechless ecstasy,—Barabbas in stupefied, fascinated amazement mingled with a strange qualm of unbelief and misgiving,—then, all at once there came a great blankness over the land,—an emptiness and sense of desolation,—the Kingly Conqueror of Death no longer lent the lustre of His beauty to the breaking day. He was gone!—He had vanished like a summer cloud absorbed in space; and only a fragrant cluster of snow-white flowers marked the spot where He had stood! And presently, across the deep stillness that followed His departure, there came the far-off ringing of bells from the city,—then the faint stir and hum of wakening life;—the mystic marvels of the night were ended,—the first Easter morn spread fully forth its glorious golden blazon; and all aflame with wonder at the scene, the sun rose.

XLI

LIKE the breaking of a charm woven by some wizard incantation, the spell which had held Barabbas dumb with awe and fear was suddenly dispersed. Recklessly springing forward without stopping to consider what he did, he confronted the Magdalen, who still knelt where her Lord had left her, her enravished eyes upturned to heaven as though she saw some mystic vision of eternal joys. With hasty ruthlessness, born of a dark suspicion that rankled in his mind, Barabbas seized her by the hands.

‘Wherefore dost thou pray to emptiness?’ he cried loudly—‘The “Nazarene” was here a moment since! Whither hath He fled?’

Mary started from her trance of worship, trembled, and looked at her fierce questioner in vague yet

sweet bewilderment, with the half-sad, half-happy smile of one who has been brusquely wakened out of an ecstatic dream.

‘Yea, truly He was here!’ she answered in soft accents that thrilled with rapture—‘Yea truly, though my faltering soul could not at first believe it, He hath risen from the dead! From henceforth who shall fear the terrors of the grave! He hath risen! Verily God hath manifested Himself unto us, and given comfort for the sorrow of the world!’

She seemed yet entranced,—her eyes were luminous, her face glowingly beautiful as that of some inspired angel. Barabbas grew more and more impatient.

‘Woman, thou art dazed or in a vision!’ he exclaimed — ‘Thy Master was ever a worker of miracles, and surely He hath worked them in the night that now is past! Prate not thus of His rising from the dead,—for of a truth methinks thou knowest that He hath never died!’

Slowly Mary rose from her knees, and putting back the falling tresses of her long bright hair gazed at him amazedly.

‘Never died!’ she echoed—‘What meanest thou?’

Art thou not Barabbas, and didst thou not behold Him die? Didst thou not weep with me for His long agony? And hast thou not looked upon Him here alive again? Art thou distraught that thou believest not in God? How camest thou hither?’

Barabbas made no answer. His dark brows were knitted frowningly; his limbs yet trembled from the agitation through which he had passed; but there was a lowering doubt within him to which he was ashamed to give utterance. He moved to the opening of the vacant tomb and peered in mistrustfully,—then after a second’s hesitation, stooped down and entered. There was nothing to be seen save the empty stone niche where the ‘Nazarene’ had slept, and the linen grave-clothes which had enswathed Him. These were rolled together and flung aside in one corner. Coming out of the dark recess, he stood silent and dissatisfied; he longed to give voice to the suspicion that like a mocking devil assailed him and worked mischief in his mind; yet he remained abashed before the tender ecstasy, deep humility and adoring faith of the woman who in the sublimity of perfect love, seemed stronger than himself, made

weak and wavering by doubt. Meanwhile, as he waited hesitatingly, watching the Magdalen, the broad beams of the sun pouring over the landscape appeared to cause a sudden movement among the hitherto inert forms of the soldiers of the watch,—and presently one of the men sprang up erect with an amazed look as though he had fallen out of the clouds.

‘Ye gods!’ he cried loudly—‘What! All asleep? Galbus! Maximus! Dion! Antinus! What! Broad day and not a man waking!’

The clamour he made, and his fashion of prodding his still only half-conscious comrades with the end of his lance, began to take effect, but before he could thoroughly rouse them all, Barabbas caught the Magdalen by the arm, and dragging her with him round the bend of the rocks in which the sepulchre was hewn, escaped from sight ere he could be discovered.

‘Lo there!’ he muttered breathlessly, when he stood safely on the high-road beside Mary, who in her dreamy bewilderment had scarcely comprehended the hurry and alarm of his action—‘If yonder Romans

had seen me by the open tomb they would have sworn I had stolen the body of the "Nazarene,"—for I am branded already as a robber. And thou, even thou would'st not have gone without suspicion,—frail woman as thou art, thou mightest have been deemed capable of treachery !'

His sombre black eyes rested darkly upon her,—but she was quite unconscious of any latent significance hidden in his words. Her countenance looked singularly fair and youthful, while it was irradiated by a holy joy that made its natural loveliness almost unearthly.

'Wilt thou now go upon thine errand?' he continued, regarding her steadfastly—'Thy Master gave thee some command,—wilt thou fulfil it? Two of thy friends have sped before thee crying "*He is risen!*"—now, do but add thy voice in all its sweet persuasiveness to theirs,—and lo! perchance the world will take thy word for truth Divine!'

She looked at him, first in amazement, then in sorrow and compassion.

'Thou poor Barabbas!' she said—'Hast thou then looked upon the Master's face, and yet canst not

believe in Him? What aileth thee, thou blind and suffering soul? In such a time of joy, why chainest thou thyself to misery? Speak all thy thought!—what hast thou in thy mind against me?’

‘Naught against thee in very truth’—answered Barabbas slowly and reluctantly, ‘save that I deem thee overwrought by such a frenzy of strange faith that thou would’st almost force a miracle! Truly I saw thy Master; and that He lived and walked and spoke I am prepared to swear,—but I repeat to thee my words—He is not dead,—He never died! And thou, Mary of Magdala, knowest this!’

Nothing but wonder now filled her clear childlike eyes.

‘What meanest thou?’ she asked anxiously—‘I cannot follow thee,—surely thou wanderest in thy speech and reason’——

‘Nay, not so!’ he interrupted her harshly—‘I am no woman, that I should be duped by feverous visions and the crazed distemper of a vain imagining! Last night, here on these hills, I too kept secret vigil,—and nothing of any import chanced, save a sudden rising of the wind with lightning and thunder. And

towards the middle of the watch, a swooning came upon me,—my senses reeled, and in the dazzlement of brain and sight, methought the lightning took strange shape and walked upon the land arrayed in wings. This blinded me, and I recall no more, for I lost hold on life till morning. Then, waking, I saw thee and thy companions coming from the city stealthily,—and afterwards while I yet waited, the twain who were thy friends came running back possessed by some distraction, and, meeting me, they swore the Crucified had risen from the dead! I believed it not,—and even now I still believe it not, though with mine own eyes I have looked upon Him living! I say that He hath never died,—upon the Cross He did but swoon! Ay!—'twas a seeming death!—and thou, Mary, didst so melt the hearts of those who crucified Him, that when they took His body from the tree, they gave it into thy charge, and to His Mother, and for pure clemency, did forbear to break His limbs. Doubtless thou also didst confer with the Arimathean counsellor, to the end that He should be laid within yon unused quiet cave, where in the darkness and cool silence He hath recovered,—

for was He not a master of the secrets of all healing? Nay, I am sure of nothing,—as man I can but reason!—one must be even as a bat or mole not to see through this scheme wrought by the unwise love of women! Go thy ways, Mary!—perjure thyself no more,—’tis no miracle to me that thus thy Master liveth!’

While he thus spoke in mingled resentment and scorn, she never moved. Listening patiently, her steadfast gaze fixed upon him, she looked the very incarnation of heavenly pity. Her lips trembled apart; she was about to speak, when another voice, clear and imperative, unexpectedly joined in the conversation—

‘Go thy ways, Mary! Fulfil thine errand and delay not; for ’tis the errand of all true women henceforth unto the end of this world’s time! An errand of love and mercy!—be thou the first one to perform it,—tell the “brethren” even as thy Master bade thee, that He hath risen!—that death is conquered by immortality, and that He ascends!—unto His Father, whom now through Him we know as Father of us all.’

And Melchior stood before them, his eyes flashing a mingled sorrow and satire. Barabbas stared at him afraid and ashamed ; how had he managed to arrive on the scene so silently that his approach had not even been observed ? Meeting his cold ironic regard, Barabbas felt suddenly humiliated, though he could not have told why ; Melchior meanwhile continued,—

‘ Well hast thou kept thy vigil, friend Barabbas !—as faithfully and observantly in very truth as those admirable followers of the “ Nazarene,” who when He besought them to watch beside Him for one hour, could not deprive themselves of sleep for all their boasted love and faithfulness ! Thou, erring and wilful sinner as thou art, hast been privileged to see the Divine and live,—and yet thou dost deem a very God imposture, measured by the ruling of thy finite reason ! Did I not tell thee thou wert man’s true type ?—and a perfect representative of thy unbelieving race ? Mary,’ and he turned to the Magdalen with a gentle reverence—‘ I pray thee linger here no longer,—but haste to bear thy news to those who are bidden to receive it ; though verily ’tis certain that not one, not even the repentant Petrus, will at first believe thy

tidings. Men will work bravely to support their own lies ; but scarce a soul shall be found on earth, willing to bear pure witness to God's Truth. But keep thou thy faith, Mary !—on woman's love and patience rests the world's future.'

She gave one fleeting startled glance at him of questioning surprise and fear,—then instinctively obeying his authoritative gesture she hastened away, her grey garments and gold hair floating together like mingled sun and cloud as she sped city-wards.

'Thou dark distrustful soul !' then said Melchior to his moody companion,—' How deservest thou any kindness of fate, seeing thou hast looked upon a God and known Him not ? Heavy would be thy punishment wert thou alone in thy perversity and sin,—but take good comfort !—all thy race are with thee !—thou art, despite thyself, the true " King of the Jews ! " Behold the watch where they come, all agape with wonder and dismay !—well may they look thus wildly, for their news is of that strangeness that some among them will scarce have skill to utter it. Stand we aside a space while they pass by.'

He drew Barabbas apart, and they both observed with differently mixed feelings, the disorderly and scrambling approach of the soldiers who were coming away from the sepulchre and hurrying towards the town. They all looked only half awake and dazed with bewilderment ; the centurion Galbus no longer headed the band, but walked, or rather stumbled along in the midst, supported by two of his men who held him up apparently despite himself. He was ghastly pale,—his eyes had a fixed unseeing stare,—he seemed like one stricken by paralysis and rendered suddenly old. Melchior glanced at him, and stepped forward—

‘Greeting to Rome!’ he said, confronting the party—‘What ails your leader?’

The soldiers halted, and Maximus who was in command replied curtly—

‘We answer no questions from strangers. Stand back and let us pass!’

Quietly Melchior lifted his right hand, displaying a broad jewelled ring on the centre finger.

‘Be civil, good Roman!’ he said—‘Respect the Emperor’s signet.’

The astonished Maximus hastily saluted,—there was no mistake about the matter,—the mysterious stranger did indeed possess the Imperial talisman; and its authority was immediately recognised.

‘I crave pardon, sir’ — murmured Maximus apologetically—‘But in this tributary province of Judæa each man of Rome must be upon his guard’——

‘Ay! and keep good vigil too, as no doubt ye all have done throughout the night;’—interrupted Melchior—‘Nothing, of course, hath chanced of any import? Ye have left the dead safely entombed?’

Silence followed. The soldiers looked down confusedly,—Maximus shivered as though the warm morning sun chilled him,—but the pallid-featured Galbus made no sign, and only stared on vaguely, straight ahead, like a blind man dreaming of light.

‘Sir’—replied Maximus after a pause—‘Of the past night there is much to tell,—but methinks it must be told first to those who have the ruling of the law among the Jews. Rome did not slay the “Nazarene,” and for that death our governor hath publicly refused to be accountable. Neither can

Rome be blamed for what hath now so strangely chanced—for lo, the seals of the Sanhedrim council are broken; the stone that closed the tomb is rolled away; and the body of the crucified Prophet hath been taken from thence,—but how these things were done I know not. I do confess we slept when we should have watched,—but truly there were strange sorceries all about us! A singing of birds was in the air; so sweet that we were fain to listen—and towards morning we beheld the heavens on fire,—that is, Galbus and myself beheld it, for these others slept:’— Here he lowered his voice and spoke almost in a whisper—‘The burden of the telling of this tale devolves on me, for Galbus is deprived of speech,—he can express nothing of what he saw,—the lightning that flashed across the land hath stricken him wholly dumb!’

‘So shall he bear no garrulous witness to the wonders of the night’—said Melchior with a grave and kindly glance at the bent and drooping figure of the lately stalwart centurion,—‘Yet be consoled, good soldier. ’Tis but a temporary silence and will pass. Whither go ye now? To Pilate?’

‘Yea, to Pilate first and then to Caiaphas’—answered Maximus—‘There shall I plainly speak of what I know. And if thou be the Emperor’s friend, good sir, I do beseech thee to mistake us not,—we have been ever honoured in the legion for prowess and vigilance till now, and truly I cannot tell how we were all entranced away from watchfulness. Nevertheless I will assert before the Tribunal, yea, and before the whole Sanhedrim, that no man’s force, be he Jew or Roman, can stand against the powers of Heaven!’ And he looked round at the dazed and helpless Galbus, marking him out by an impressive gesture as the living proof of the terrors of the past vigil.

Melchior drew back.

‘Fear not, soldier! Thou shalt not lose place in the legion, nor shalt thou lack protection from Cæsar. On to the city!—present this dumb centurion to Caiaphas,—and speak thou the truth as it is apparent unto thee, but doubt not that a lie will be quickly substituted for it! The lie will best suit the Jews,—’twill cost little trouble to keep up, being prone to propagate itself in endless forms,—but the Truth

will need fighting for and dying for through ages yet to come! Farewell! In whatsoever way I can, I will commend thee to the Emperor.'

Again Maximus saluted profoundly, and the men resumed their dusty hurried march. As they went, one said to his fellow,

'Yonder stranger who doth wear our Emperor's signet is not particular in choice of comrades, for with him was Barabbas.'

'Barabbas!' echoed the other, — 'He that was released from punishment of death in place of the "Nazarene"?''

'Even he! 'Tis said he was a robber.'

They trudged on through the thick white dust, and presently the whole company arrived at the gates of the city, where they were met by a rabble of the Jewish populace who hailed them with shouts of derision. The rumour had already gone abroad that the crucified Prophet of Nazareth had risen from the dead, and though none believed in the miracle, there were a few superstitious souls in the crowd who imparted to others their notion that He had not really died, and moreover could not die. But

the general impression was that the Body had been stolen from the tōmb in spite of all precaution,—that the soldiers had been plied with wine, and in all probability drugged into a lethargy, and that while they slept off the effects of over-much liquor, the disciples of the ‘Nazarene’ had moved away the stone from the sepulchre and carried off their dead Master. In any case Roman vigilance had been baffled, and to the Jewish mob there was something peculiarly pleasing in this defeat. They yelled and hooted round the discomfited ‘watch,’—pointing out the tottering Galbus with jeers as ‘one that hath not yet recovered from his winebibbing!’ and formed a disorderly cortège up to the house of Pilate. There, when the great portal was unbarred to admit the soldiers, and these passed in, the malcontents remained for a little time outside, shouting ironical applause for the valour of Rome,—then, tired of their own clamour, gradually dispersed.

Meanwhile, Barabbas once more in the shelter of the inn where Melchior lodged, turned to that strange personage and asked abruptly,

‘How camest thou to wear the Emperor’s signet?’

‘That is my business, not thine, Barabbas!’ responded Melchior tranquilly—‘Learn thou the first rule of civility, which is, to ask no questions on matters which do not concern thee. The Emperor is my friend,—and for a service I have done him I hold Rome itself in fee.’

Barabbas opened his eyes wide in astonishment, and would certainly have pressed for further information had he not been interrupted at that moment by a soft knocking at the door, and the sound of a voice calling eagerly—

‘Open! Open quickly! I have news for Barabbas. It is I,—Mary of Magdala.’

XLII

I N answer to this summons they unlatched the door, and confronted the Magdalen on the threshold. She was breathless with running, and her eyes expressed a great and compassionate anxiety.

‘I promised thee, Barabbas,’—she began hurriedly, —‘I promised thee that if I heard aught of Judith Iscariot I would tell thee,—lo now, I have found her! She is in the wooded grove of Gethsemane,—alone, strangely distraught and ill,—dying perchance! I pray thee tarry not, but come with me straightway, —thou may’st persuade her from thence. I cannot. She weeps and sings,—anon she clasps her hands and prays,—then she flies from me as one in fear,—’twill need much tenderness to move her,—but thou as one familiar to her sight may haply entice her homeward —prithee come!’

'Yea, go quickly now, Barabbas,'—said Melchior gently—'In the sorrow of a broken heart, love must needs pardon sin, and make an end of bitterness.'

He turned away, and Barabbas, needing no second bidding, hastened out of the house with the Magdalen, in a tremor of excitement and apprehension. The way to Gethsemane seemed interminably long, and yet they lost no time, not even in converse, for both were full of thoughts that baffled words. At last they reached the gate of the garden, and as she lifted the latch, Mary held up one hand warningly.

'Listen!' she said.

Faint fragments of song came floating towards them,—broken scraps of melody, sweet and solemn and wild,—and presently Barabbas recognised the sonorous rhythm of the stanzas of Solomon the Poet-King:

'Whither is thy beloved gone, O thou fairest among
women ?

Whither is thy beloved turned aside ?

Tell us, that we may seek him with thee.

My beloved is gone down into his garden,
To the beds of spices and to gather lilies ;
My beloved is mine and I am his !

Awake, O north wind, and come thou south !
Blow upon my garden and on the spices thereof ;
Let my beloved come into his garden '—

Here the voice broke with a sharp discordant cry—

‘Judas ! Judas ! Judas !’

This name three times repeated, sent shuddering echoes of shrill despair through the solemn tranquillity of Gethsemane, and Barabbas trembled as he heard.

‘Where is she?’ he demanded, in a hoarse whisper.

Mary Magdalene made no reply, but took him by the hand and led him onward.

They followed a winding path, so overgrown with moss that their footsteps made no sound upon it, and presently came in view of a grassy knoll tufted with palms, and furthermore adorned by the broken shell

of a disused fountain. Here a white figure sat droopingly, all alone; surrounded by a fantastic tangle of creepers and flowers that lay in straggling lengths upon the turf, apparently just gathered and thrown idly down to perish. Mary and Barabbas moved cautiously on, till they were within a few steps of that solitary woman-shape, upon whose fiery-gold hair the sunlight shed a deeper flame.

‘Pause here a while’—whispered Mary then—‘She hath a singular suddenness of violence in her,—and if we come upon her unpreparedly, she will take instant flight. Best let me go before, and speak with her.’

But some instinctive sense of being watched, already moved the distraught girl. Springing to her feet, she shaded her eyes with one hand and looked straight down upon them. Then lifting up her voice once more in that wailing cry, ‘Judas!’ she came rushing forward. With flying hair and feverishly glittering eyes she confronted them, and as her wild gaze fell on Barabbas, she uttered an exclamation of joy:

‘Judas!’ and she ran to him, flinging her arms about

him in delirious ecstasy—‘Judas, thou art here at last! Why didst thou not come sooner? I have wandered all about the city seeking thee,—yea! I have even killed Caiaphas for thy sake! Didst thou not know of this, and art thou not glad? Of a truth he was a traitor; but alas! I learned his treachery too late to serve thee in the saving of thy friend the “Nazarene.” And willingly do I confess my share of blame,—not thou, poor Judas, wert in fault; ’twas all my doing, and Caiaphas persuaded me,—therefore grieve thou no more for others’ crimes. And now I have done all I could to make amends, thou wilt forgive me? Is it not so? Thou wilt forgive thy little sister? Thou wilt love her still?’

While thus she moaned and murmured, with mingled sobs and smiles, pressing her soft face against his breast and lifting up her beautiful dark anguished eyes entreatingly, Barabbas felt as if his heart must break,—tears rose in his throat and choked his power of speech,—he pressed her convulsively in his arms but could say nothing,—and she whose madness was capable of endless fluctuations, from tenderness to ferocity, grew irritated at his silence. Tearing herself

away from him she stood apart, eyeing him at first with wonder,—then with complete repugnance and scorn.

‘Thou art not Judas after all!’ she said—‘How darest thou break in upon my solitude? Knowest thou not that this is my garden of dreams? I dwell here always,—and I will have none but Judas with me. I saw him last night,—he came to me and said that all was well with him,—that he would meet me here,—and for a moment I did fancy thou wert he. But no, thou art some insolent intruder!—get thee hence and trouble me not,—I have many flowers to gather yet, wherewith to strew my grave. For I am dead, and this is the borderland of vision,—Judas is dead also,—and we both wander yet apart,—but we shall meet,—I know not when or how,—but sure I am ’twill not be long!’

She paused in her incoherent speech, and Mary Magdalene ventured to approach her.

‘Judith!—poor Judith!’ she murmured gently and took her hand. Judith looked at her dubiously and somewhat resentfully,—then smiled, a piteous wan smile.

‘Thou art very kind!’ she sighed,—‘I do remember,—thou wert here before, not long since, and didst whisper words of comfort passing sweetly. Albeit I know thee not,—still, thou art woman,—thou canst understand my grief. I cannot go from hence,—for I have promised to abide here until Judas comes, therefore I pray thee do not vex me by entreaty. Moreover I must hide me for a while, for I have slain the high-priest Caiaphas,—do they know it yet in the city?—and will they search for me? I have sworn they shall not find me,—Judas will come at sunset and bear me hence with him,—’tis very lonely waiting, and if thou dost desire it thou canst stay with me a while,—but send away yon stranger.’

And she pointed to Barabbas, who drew back sorrowfully, stricken to the heart by an anguish he could scarcely conceal. But Judith did not comprehend his torture,—apparently she had no memory or recognition of him,—her errant fancy was already drifting elsewhere.

‘Take me away to the trees yonder’—she said to Mary supplicatingly—‘And let us sit down and sing

Or thou shalt sing and I will sleep. I am tired,—the way is endless; one meets too many dreams. They rise one after the other,—some beautiful, some dreadful, and Judas is in them all. And there is a red streak round his throat just where the cord pressed it,—this cord’—and she touched a frayed rope hanging at her waist—‘I cut the noose,—nevertheless he still seems to suffer, though he should not, and methinks at times he looks upon me wrathfully. ’Tis cruel of him,—he should remember the old days when we were children,—one should never forget the love of home. And though age has crept upon me now, I once was young,—and such beauty was mine as is seldom seen! “*The fairest woman in Judæa*” I was called, and this was true,—Judas should think of it, and not despise me now, because, through suffering, that fairness hath departed. Moreover of this “Nazarene” he served, he hath not told me aught; save that He was wise and good, and poor and all unrecognised,—but this is the history of all wise good men, and is not strange. Some say He was a god,—but there be many gods in Rome! Justitia, Pilate’s wife, thinks naught of gods. And

I have even heard the daughter of Annas say that she did doubt and hate the great Jehovah,—and this, when she was wife of Caiaphas, Jehovah's priest. Perchance she was unhappy,—and had good cause to doubt her husband's faithfulness!—who knows!—but of a very truth she loved not God! Methinks 'tis difficult to love a Power Unseen. Such thoughts weary me; but this doth comfort me'—and she drew from her bosom the same kind of roughly-made cross she had before possessed, formed of two twigs of olive,—'Caiaphas did break one in his fury, —and for that, as well as other things, I slew him, —this is another I have made, and 'tis a magic symbol! for when I raise it—so!' and she lifted it above her head in a sort of rapture—'methinks I hear most wondrous music, and a sweet voice saying "Peace!"'

She nestled close to the Magdalen, who with pitying tears, placed one arm round her and strove to lead her away. But she quickly perceived that the direction taken was towards the exit from the garden, and she obstinately refused to move a step further on that path.

'No, no!' she said—'We will go deeper in among the trees. There is a place of palms yonder, and many flowers, and shade and fragrance. Come!—sing me to sleep—be thou my friend, and stay with me till sunset, when Judas will be here.'

She began to gather up all her fallen garlands, and while she was thus occupied, the Magdalen whispered to Barabbas—

'Comfort thyself, friend,—I will stay with her a little. Thou canst follow and see the place where she will choose to rest—then go thou quickly to her father and tell him she is here. Prepare him well to use with her both force and gentleness,—be not thus sorrowful and amazed at her dislike of thee—she knows thee not at all,—a cloud is on her brain;—have patience!'

'Hath she slain Caiaphas?' muttered Barabbas unsteadily—'Or is the fancy born of her distraction?'

'I know not!' answered Mary—'Thou must inquire and learn. I have heard nothing—for to me the Master's rising from the dead hath sufficed as news for all the world! Of men's doings I know naught.'

As she spoke thus in hurried accents, Judith caught her impatiently by the arm and drew her away.

‘Bid yon stranger depart’—she said—‘I like him not! He doth resemble one Barabbas! He was my lover and I did betray him,—he would slay me if he knew!’

And she quickened her pace. The Magdalen accompanied her, and Barabbas followed slowly at a little distance, striving to conceal himself as much in the background as possible. At last, after various erratic ups and downs, Judith arrived at what she called ‘a place of palms.’ The feathery foliage towered high up against the deep blue sky, and smaller trees of thicker branch and leaf cast their green gloom on the smooth turf, while numberless climbing roses and passion-flowers had grown up arch-wise so as to form a complete bower of shade. Here the frenzied girl seemed to grow suddenly calm,—she sighed profoundly, and her troubled countenance cleared. She sat down under the natural canopy of flowers with Mary beside her. A smile parted her lips,—the old sweet witching smile that on that perfect mouth had been a resistless snare for the souls of men.

‘Sing!’ she said—‘Some simple song of tenderness that will banish all the spectres flitting round me! I will not ask thee who thou art,—thou hast a look of love within thine eyes and thou art beautiful. Yea!—thou hast long fair tresses full of sunshine,—but see!’ and she held up a mass of her own luxuriant hair which was like gold and fire commingled—‘This is a brighter colour methinks!—and ’tis even as silk unto the touch. Lo, when I die thou shalt sever it and make a rope thereof,—twine it around the throat of Judas,—and maybe it will heal his wound. Now sing!’

She leaned her head against Mary’s breast and half closed her eyes. Barabbas ventured nearer and stood in the shadow of the trees, listening while the voice of the Magdalen, honey-sweet yet shaken by tears sounded plaintively on the silence. And the song that she sang ran thus ;

The earth hath many flowers ; in all the fields and
bowers

Their radiant blossoms open ’neath the glory of
the sun,—

But their leaves are scarce unfurl'd to the summer
of the world,

When they perish in their beauty, every one.

Brief is their fair delight; 'tis ended ere the night :

Sad emblems are they all of the sadder lives of
men !

*Better be a rose, the wildest one that blows,
And safe in the shelter of the King's garden !*

The lofty laurels stand, at a conqueror's right hand,
To deck the feasts of triumph and the revellings of
mirth,

Lilies and bays are bound for the brows of heroes
crowned,

As symbols of the evanescent earth,—

But beauty, pride, and power, are the blossoms of
an hour,

Bringing sorrow more than safety to the weary
souls of men ;

*Better be a rose, the wildest one that blows,
And safe in the shelter of the King's garden !*

The soft, quaint, almost solemn melody ceased, and

Judith began to rock herself to and fro restlessly, wringing her hands as though she were in pain.

'The King's garden!' she wailed—'Ay!—but where is the King? He was crowned with thorns and He is dead,—dead! they have crucified Him! I, Judith Iscariot, *by subtilty*, betrayed Him!—on me, on me, let the curse fall—not on Judas, not on Judas, merciful God!—but on me! On me let the thunders crash vengeance,—let the fires of earth consume me,—mine was the sin—mine, I say!—Judas was innocent! In the King's garden one should meet the King,—but He is dead; I would that He were living, for since He died I have been lost in darkness!'

And she broke into a passion of wild weeping. Mary drew her compassionately into her arms and glancing backward made a slight sign to Barabbas. He understood, and turning away, hastened out of Gethsemane, his heart aching and his eyes full of scalding blinding tears, while the strange refrain of the Magdalen's song echoed itself over and over again in his ears—

*Better be a rose, the wildest one that blows,
And safe in the shelter of the King's garden!*

Better, ay, far better! Best of all things in life, death and eternity it is, to be the humblest creature ever born, and 'safe,'—safe in the shelter of that mystic 'garden' where Christ is King!

XLIII

MAKING his way with all possible speed towards the house of Iscariot to bear the ill news of Judith's distraught condition to her already broken-hearted father, Barabbas found the whole city in strange confusion. The streets were blocked by disorderly crowds of people wandering to and fro, many of whom were weeping and wailing hysterically, while others were wildly crying out that '*the graves were opened*' and that the world was coming to an end. Elbowing a difficult passage through the throng, Barabbas inquired the cause of the seeming tumult, and learned that the rumour of the 'Nazarene's' miraculous resurrection had excited what some practical persons called 'a fever of imagination' among the populace, and that numbers of men and women had been suddenly seized by

frenzy and had run out of their houses in frantic terror, shrieking aloud that they had 'seen the dead!' Long-perished friends, and loved ones who had slept entombed for years, now appeared again among the living, so these living swore; spirit-hands touched them, spirit-voices called them,—all the air was full of mystic sound. Possessed by superstitious fear, they could not be persuaded to return to their usual daily occupations, and were only pacified by crowding together in the open thoroughfares, and leaguings themselves as it were, in a band of mutual support and protection against the overwhelming Supernatural that on that wondrous morning seemed to invest the land. Iscariot was not in the city, so Barabbas learned,—his unhappy son Judas had been buried in haste and privacy early in the morning, and he himself, after the dreary obsequies were over, had taken horse and ridden out towards Bethany in renewed search for his lost daughter. Nevertheless, in spite of this information, Barabbas pressed on in the vague hope of meeting him, till finally he could go no further, being completely hemmed in by an excited mob that was pouring itself towards the

house of Caiaphas. In the midst of the howling, hooting, unreasoning rabble, were the Roman soldiers who had been set to guard the sacred sepulchre; they had just undergone examination by Pontius Pilate, and by him were now sent on to tell the story of their night's adventure to the high-priest. They could scarcely keep the order of their march, so roughly were they hustled by the irritated and impatient crowd, and they had much ado to refrain from responding wrathfully to the repeated jeers of impudent half-grown lads, and beggars of both sexes who helped to swell the riotous cortège, shouting insults all the way.

‘Lo, what drunken varlets are these men of Rome! They could not guard even a dead Jew!’

‘Where is the Prophet of Nazareth?’

‘Who broke the seals of Sanhedrim?’

‘What have ye done with the King of the Jews? Give Him back to us and we will crucify Him a second time more surely!’

Meanwhile as the noisy concourse came roaring and jostling onward, within the high-priest's palace itself there was a great hush and shadow. All the

servants and officers of the household knew that Caiaphas had been dangerously wounded on the previous night by some secret assassin who had stabbed him and left him for dead. He had been found lying senseless and bleeding on the piece of grass immediately below his private balcony; and the attempted murder was, without any hesitation, judged to be the act of one of the disciples of the 'Nazarene,' who had, in all likelihood, considered it a rightful means of avenging his dead Master. A surgeon had been hastily summoned, who gave it as his opinion that the injury inflicted would not necessarily prove fatal, but that to ensure recovery the patient must have the greatest care and the utmost quiet. Accordingly, the gates of the palace were closed against all comers; the servants went about on tip-toe,—Rachel, 'the pale daughter of Annas' as Judith had been wont to call her, sat somewhat apart from the couch of her priestly spouse, occasionally ministering to his wants with that dutiful yet frigid exactitude which might distinguish a paid nurse rather than a wife,—the curtains at the casement of the sick man's chamber were closely

drawn to exclude the dazzling sunlight, and every possible precaution had been taken to ensure absolute tranquillity. But all this care was of little avail, since Caiaphas himself was the despair of his physician. He groaned and swore,—tossing and tumbling among his pillows in a restless fury at his own enforced inactivity,—and he could scarcely respond to the soothing and bland inquiries of Annas, his colleague and father-in-law, with any show of patience or civility.

‘Truly thou dost chafe thy spirit needlessly, Caiaphas’—observed that sleek personage sedately—‘Seeing that I am here to act for thee and carry out thy duties of the Temple ministration. Moreover thou art singularly unwise and obstinate in withholding from us all description of thy would-be murderer. He must be tracked and punished as thou knowest,—this weapon that was found beside thee, and with which thou wert well-nigh slain, will aid us in discovery.’

Caiaphas flung aside his coverings and made an attempt to sit up. The attendant physician remonstrated, but he paid no heed.

‘What weapon dost thou speak of?’ he muttered hoarsely—‘Give it to me! Let me look upon it!’

Annas, alarmed at the fierce expression of his face, at once gave it to him. He clutched it,—then glared angrily round the room.

‘Leave me, all of ye!’ he said—‘All, save my wife. I would speak with her alone.’

His irritability was such that they dared not provoke him further by contradiction,—his command was therefore obeyed. He waited in silence till the door closed behind the retiring figures of Annas, the physician, and two servants who had been in waiting,—then he sank back on his pillows exhausted, still holding fast the jewelled dagger with which Judith Iscariot had in her frenzy so nearly made an end of his life.

‘Rachel, come to me!’ he called faintly yet imperatively.

His wife approached him. She was a slight dark pensive-looking woman with pale composed features and cold calm eyes.

‘Thou hast seen this toy before,’—he said, showing her the dagger, ‘Thou knowest it?’

She glanced at it indifferently.

'Full well!' she answered—'Tis Judith's jewelled plaything—a gift to her from the dead Gabrias!'

Caiaphas turned himself restlessly.

'Ay! 'tis Judith's. The girl is frenzied for her brother's death,—she came to me last night,—she knew not what she said or did. 'Twas she who stabbed me,—but none must know of it. Take thou the weapon therefore, and cast it in the well below the garden,—thou wilt do this and say nothing,—passionless as thou art, I feel that I can trust thee!'

She took the dagger, and a curious smile flitted across her features.

'Alas, poor Judith!' she said.

Caiaphas gave her a quick surprised look.

'Thou dost pity her?'

'With all my soul!'

A feverish rush of blood crimsoned the high-priest's features.

'I loved her!' he cried hoarsely, in a sudden reckless access of pain and passion—'Hearest thou, Rachel! I loved her!'

Rachel's cold eyes rested scornfully upon him.

‘I hear, Caiaphas! And I know!’

‘Learn then yet another thing!’ he continued wildly—‘For her sake I have been faithless unto thee!’

‘That also do I know!’ responded Rachel with chill equanimity.

‘And sayest thou nothing?—carest thou nothing?’ he demanded, amazed and exasperated.

Over the face of the pale daughter of Annas came the warm flush of a righteous disdain.

‘I say nothing because I feel nothing, Caiaphas!’ she replied—‘To know thee as I have known thee, ever since the day when my father Annas gave my life into thy cruel keeping, would make the softest woman’s heart as hard as steel or adamant! I care nothing,—for who could care for the loss or the retaining of a love so valueless as thine! Speak we no more of this, for I have schooled myself to silence;—I am thy wife,—only thy wife, who according to thy measure is little more than dog or slave! And I will do thy bidding as dog and slave till death releases me, for out of mine own self-respect and pride I will not let thee boast that I have failed in

aught. And of thy sensual passions I heed nothing,—thou art free to follow them, seeing thou dost walk in the holy ways of Abraham, to whom most surely all women born were of less account than the cattle of the field!—yet he was the favourite of the self-same God thou servest,—and so perchance art thou! But for me, henceforth, there shall be other gods than one who doth reward with favour the lies and infidelities of man!’

Such passion vibrated in her voice, such wrath flashed within her eyes, that for the moment her husband was stupefied with astonishment;—but as she turned to leave the room, he called her back angrily—

‘Rachel!’

‘What now?’

‘How darest thou’ . . . he panted huskily—‘How darest thou assault me with thy shrewish tongue thus furiously’——

She smiled coldly.

‘I dare all things, being wronged!’ she answered; ‘And for Judith Iscariot I have naught but love!—love and gratitude that she did seek to rid the world

of thee! 'Twas bravely done! I would she had succeeded!

And with haughty step and slow, she passed out of the apartment, just as Annas, white and trembling with alarm entered it again, accompanied by the physician.

'Caiaphas! . . . Caiaphas!' . . . he stammered.

'Sir, be calm!' interposed the physician anxiously, hastening to the bedside of his patient,—'I sought to keep intruders from thee,—but now this business seemeth strange and urgent'——

He broke off, and Caiaphas, still agitated by the unexpected conduct of his wife towards him, stared wonderingly from one to the other.

'What ails ye both?' he asked feebly—'How! dost thou tremble, Annas?—thou who art moved by nothing save a lack of delicate food? Speak, man! What news is on thy lips?'

'Pilate hath sent his men to thee'—faltered Annas; 'The watch hath been broken,—the sepulchre is empty'——

With a frightful cry Caiaphas almost leaped from his bed.

‘Cowards! Thieves! Let them not dare to say the Man of Nazareth hath risen from the dead, for if His body be no longer in the tomb, it hath been stolen! Where are these laggards?—these worthless Romans? Pilate hath sent them?—then bid them enter!’

Annas glanced at the physician, who shrugged his shoulders and threw up his hands, implying by these gestures his resignation of all responsibility in a matter so entirely beyond his control.

‘Bid them enter!’ shouted Caiaphas again, his face convulsed with impatience and fury. And in another moment, Maximus, with the speechless Galbus and the rest of his men keeping behind him, appeared.

‘Sir,’ said he, looking full at the high-priest, who glared at him in return with an expression of implacable and vengeful ferocity — ‘Methinks I am come at an ill time, seeing thou art wounded and suffering; nevertheless I am bound to fulfil the received command of the governor. Pilate hath sent me hither to tell thee that our watch hath been in vain,—the Heavens have interposed, and a

miracle hath been enacted; the "Nazarene" hath risen!'

'Liar!' and Caiaphas well-nigh foaming at the mouth, clutched at the purple coverings of his couch and leaned forward as though he were about to hurl some deadly weapon at the speaker; 'Liar! Who art thou, dastard Roman, that darest presume upon my patience by the bringing of a false report? *Thou* wert not placed in charge! Galbus did head thy band of scoundrels,—let *him* speak!'

Maximus, pale with rage at the insult thus offered to himself and his comrades, had much ado to control his rising temper.

'Sir priest,' he said, breathless with suppressed anger—'Thou goest too far in the manner of thy speech, seeing Judæa is the slave of Rome, and thou thyself a payer of tribute unto Cæsar. I have not brought thee any false report,—I scorn to lie,—and I am here to tell the truth of what I saw. That these men about me slept I deny not,—but I was wakeful,—and with mine own eyes I did behold, at the first quarter after midnight, the heavens opened, and two

god-like Shapes descending towards the tomb. Galbus looked on the marvellous sight with me,—and with the lightning of the glory we were smitten to the ground even as dead men. At morning when we woke, we found the great stone rolled away from the sepulchre, and the tomb itself empty of all save the linen cerements wherein the body of the “Nazarene” was swathed. And as for Galbus, I would that any bidding of thine or mine could make him speak,—for since the fearful fires did fall upon us both at midnight, he hath been smitten feeble as thou seest him now, and dumb.’

While Maximus thus spoke the countenance of Caiaphas had grown livid and hideous with the restrained passion and bitter malice of his soul.

‘Would I had had my way!’ he muttered thickly between the slow gasps of his labouring breath—‘I would have hewn the body of the crucified blasphemer asunder limb from limb, and flung each portion to the dogs that roam the city!’ He paused, choking back the terrible oath that rose to his lips, and then went on slowly, addressing himself again to Maximus: ‘So!—this is the story of the thieves’ trick played

upon ye by the Galilean rogues who, like their Master, practise devils' magic! Think not I am deceived; no dead man rises from the grave, and I will sift this matter! Galbus hath lost the power of speech thou sayest,—nevertheless he is not deaf methinks,—he is capable of signs. Let him stand forth and face me! I will question him, and by the God of Israel he shall answer me, if only in dumb show!’

His irate order was obeyed,—the two soldiers who supported the tottering, half-paralysed Galbus, led him forward. Caiaphas, leaning out of bed, grasped him by the arm roughly.

‘Galbus!’

Slowly the wandering lack-lustre eyes of the centurion lifted themselves and rested vaguely on the high-priest's pale and resentful visage. At first there was no expression whatever in their fixed regard,—but gradually the light of returning intelligence and memory brightened and dilated them, and a sudden change began to manifest itself in the whole demeanour of the stricken man. Drawing a deep breath, he straightened his drooping figure, and

shook himself free of his two supporters, who stared upon him in amazement,—with one hand he felt for his sword, and as he touched the familiar hilt, he smiled, and raised his head with his former proud and martial bearing. Caiaphas watched him in astonishment and suspicion—the man's former crushed and helpless demeanour seemed now an elaborate pretence,—his very dumbness might be assumed!—and believing this to be the case, a black frown wrinkled the high-priest's brows as he fiercely demanded—

‘How now, Galbus! What report hast thou to offer of thy duty?—what knowest thou of last night's vigil? If thou art dumb, make signs; if thou hast any utterance, speak! Who made thy watch of no avail, and turned thy Roman valour into trembling?’

With sudden and startling vehemence the unexpected answer came:

‘Jesus of Nazareth, Son of the living God!’

It was Galbus who spoke,—the spell of silence was all at once lifted from him,—and his voice, resonant, clear and convincing, rang like a trumpet—

note through the room. Wonder and dismay fell upon all who heard him,—but he, expanding and glorying as it were in the utterance of a truth, exclaimed again loudly and fearlessly—

‘Jesus of Nazareth, Son of the living God!’

Maddened with rage, Caiaphas made a frantic attempt to strike him on the mouth, but was prevented by the politic Annas.

‘Away with him, away with him!’ he cried furiously, impotently beating the air with his clenched fists—‘Bind him,—gag him!—slay him! I will be answerable for his death to Cæsar! Gag him, I say!—silence him in earnest!—he is a liar, a liar!—he shall be branded as such to his nation!—bear him hence quickly,—let him not shout his blasphemies through the town! Gag him!—ye villains, ye will not obey me!—ye will let the people think the crucified malefactor a god divine,—curse him, I say!—curse ye all for a band of liars!—ye foul brutes, ye cowards of Rome,—ye base panderers to the scum of Galilee’——

His voice broke in a sharp cry,—his wound began to bleed afresh and the crimson stain welled rapidly

through the linen wrappings; the physician, seriously alarmed, declared to Annas that he could not be answerable for his patient's life if this scene were allowed to continue. Annas therefore took it upon himself to put an end to the inquiry.

‘Get ye all hence!’ he said, addressing himself to Maximus angrily—‘And take this raving Galbus out of hearing! His dumbness was better than his speech. But think not we shall let this matter rest thus,—what reasoning man would of sane will accept a fool’s report such as thou bringest! We are not to be duped either by Galileans or Romans!’

Maximus gave him no reply save a look of supreme scorn,—Galbus meanwhile had been coldly watching the pallid and convulsed face of Caiaphas.

‘Lo, how the devils in this Jewish priest do torture him!’ he said meditatively—‘Hell itself cries out upon Christ’s murderer!’

‘Silence, thou knave!’ cried Annas.

‘Silence thyself, thou Jew!’ retorted Galbus —
 ‘Thou canst not so command a soldier of Tiberius!’

Annas grew livid with rage. The physician who was engaged in stanching the blood that flowed from Caiaphas's wound, again interposed, entreating that the room might be cleared and his patient left tranquil. Annas therefore, with difficulty restraining the torrent of invective that rose to his lips, assumed an air of dignified rebuke.

‘Centurion, ’tis beneath me and my sacred calling to argue with the base and the unworthy. Hence!—with thy men,—through Pilate we shall yet communicate with thee, and report thy conduct to the Emperor. Doubt not that justice will be done!—both unto thee and unto us,—and whosoever broke the seals of the Sanhedrim affixed upon the tomb ye all were set to guard, shall be tracked and punished with the extremest penalty of the law.’

Galbus smiled grimly.

‘Track ye the angels then, and find the path to Heaven!’ he said—‘To false priests the task will not be easy!’

And turning abruptly on his heel he placed himself at the head of his company as if he had never left command of it. In the momentary pause before

the little troop departed, one soldier hung back and made a secret sign to Annas.

‘What would’st thou?’ said Annas impatiently—
‘Seest thou not the high-priest almost swoons?—he can stand no more of this rude clamour.’

‘I would but say one thing to him’—said the man, who was a dark-browed, evil-looking fellow from Sicily—‘Haply it might give him a clue.’

Annas looked at him scrutinisingly, then quickly approached Caiaphas, who had sunk back on his pillows in a sort of lethargy.

‘This soldier hath a private word for thee, my son,’ he said.

Caiaphas opened his languid bloodshot eyes.

‘Vex me no more!’ he muttered feebly—‘I suffer!—let me rest!’

‘Sir’—said the soldier quickly—‘’tis but a hint to thee, which may serve to some good purpose. ’Tis true we slept upon our watch last night, lulled into slumber by a wondrous singing as of nightingales,—and of ourselves we saw no marvels, despite what Maximus hath told thee. But on this morning as we came away from the sepulchre, a stranger met us

on the road who did inquire most particularly as to the nature of our vigil. He had a foreign aspect, and to our wonder, wore the Emperor's signet. And with him was Barabbas.'

Caiaphas started, and heedless of his wound, sat up.

'Barabbas?'

'Yea, sir. Barabbas. He that was a robber.'

A sudden gleam of malicious joy sparkled in the high-priest's eyes.

'Soldier, I thank thee! Thou hast done well in telling me of this. Come back hither later on, and thou shalt have gold from the treasury as thy reward. And mark me, friend!—to all thy comrades who did sleep, seeing *no* miracle, but only seeing Barabbas on the road next morning, gold shall be meted out full lavishly, provided they will tell this thing throughout the town. Barabbas did defend the "Nazarene," and therefore may be ranked among His followers and disciples. Thou sayest truly,—*Barabbas was a robber!*'

And when the soldier had rejoined his companions, and the sound of the retreating footsteps of all the

men had died away in the outer corridor, Caiaphas lay back again upon his couch with a sigh of deep relief and contentment. Smiling an evil smile, he murmured to himself softly—

‘Barabbas?—*Barabbas was a robber.*’

And in an hour’s time, despite his recent rage and excitement, he slept tranquilly,—while on his thin closely-compressed lips, even in deep slumber, still lingered the shadow of that wicked smile.

XLIV

EMERGING at last with difficulty from the turbulent throng that had accompanied the Roman soldiers to the high-priest's palace and that now waited in a dense mass outside the gates for their return, Barabbas managed finally to reach Iscariot's dwelling. The house was shut up and in mourning; and none of the servants could truly tell where their master had gone after his son's melancholy funeral. Uncertain what to do, and shrinking from the idea of confiding to paid menials the news that their mistress was wandering about distraught, with no other companion or friend than the evilly-reputed Magdalen, Barabbas could see no other course open to him than to return at once to Gethsemane and consult with Mary as to what next could be done to restore the unhappy girl to her no less unhappy

father. He therefore made the best of his way back to the garden through certain by-streets where the crowd had not penetrated, and as he came out upon the open road leading to the Mount of Olives, within sight of the trees of Gethsemane, he perceived a group of persons standing together in earnest conversation. Drawing nearer he recognised one of them as Simon Peter; the others he did not know, but judged from their appearance and dress that they were Galileans, and followers of Him that was called the 'Nazarene.' He would have passed them by, in his haste to reach his destination, but that Peter saw him and called to him. He approached reluctantly.

'This is Barabbas!' said Peter slowly—'He who was released unto the Jews instead of the Lord. He hath repented of his crimes; shall we not persuade him to go with us?'

The others looked upon him curiously,—one, a fair tall man with a noble head and brilliant yet dreamy eyes, addressed him gently—

'Friend, thou art welcome! Knowest thou that He whom the wicked crucified, hath risen gloriously from the dead? Wherefore, we, His disciples, grieve

no more, seeing that now we have such hope as faileth not! We are journeying from hence to Bethany and on towards Galilee, even as He, our Master bids us,—He hath promised to meet us on the way.'

Barabbas gazed steadily at the speaker.

'Believest thou, with all thy soul, that He hath risen from the dead?'

'Yea, truly!'

'Prithee, who art thou?'

'My name is John.'

A pause ensued. Barabbas stood silent, his brows knitted, his eyes burning sombrely like clouded fire beneath their thick black lashes.

'Wilt thou go with us?' demanded Peter,—'Perchance thou also, on the way, wilt meet and see the risen Lord!'

'Nay, I have seen Him!' answered Barabbas, and as he said the words, the listening disciples started and exchanged amazed glances one with the other—
'And from your words I gather that ye have not! Truly He lives!—that I will swear! Ye have received this news from Mary Magdalene,—and ye are ready

to accept the woman's version as a miracle,—but I,—I was near her when He did converse with her,—I watched His face,—I heard His voice,—I saw Him glide, or melt away! Whither He went I know not; for though I searched the tomb He was not there,'—

‘We also searched the tomb’—began Peter.

‘What! Then ye doubted of His rising from the dead?—even ye?’ And Barabbas smiled darkly. ‘Will ye know Him, think ye, if ye meet Him by the way?’

‘Know Him?’ cried Peter — ‘Ay!—among a thousand thousand!’

Barabbas looked straight at him, with a melancholy scorn in his black eyes.

‘Take heed, Peter! Swear nothing. Thou didst deny Him thrice!’

He waited a moment; then went on in slow deliberate accents.

‘Righteous sirs, I am beholden to ye all for the offer of your comradeship; nevertheless I may not join your company. Methinks my destiny is ordered elsewhere. I am a man of many sins, and cankered

o'er with doubts and fears that would not well consort with your fidelity. Nevertheless I deem the Truth can never hurt a man, being most surely part of God, if God there be,—therefore the truth of my refusal ye shall have from me. Lo then, when your Master was betrayed, ye did most pitilessly all forsake Him ; and for that one abhorrent deed, my soul rebels against ye ! Sooner would I companion Judas in his self-sought grave than follow in your track !—I could not break my bread in peace with one deserter of the sinless “ Nazarene ” !’

He paused, agitated by strange passion, and they were all silent, amazed and inwardly stung at the pitiless veracity and daring of his speech.

‘I am Barabbas,’—he continued, ‘And my name may serve, an’ ye choose it, for all that is worst in man. I have been both thief and murderer,—I am a vagabond of no value in the world, and I speak without learning, — but I strive not to hide my crimes,—I make no pretence of being what I am not. Ye perchance are righteous, and think ye may exalt mankind,—I am a sinner, and know that men can seldom be exalted. I make no secret of my dis-

belief; and I say unto you all plainly, that to my thought the Man of Nazareth hath never died, inasmuch as since that so-called death I have myself this very morn, beheld Him living. Wonderful in truth was His aspect,—I do confess it!—marvellous beauty and great light attended Him,—but even thus He always looked, ay, even in the Hall of Pilate when first I saw His face. That He swooned upon the Cross is possible,—that He recovered in the tomb is also possible; yea, I would even credit that with the force pent up in His most noble and heroic frame, He could Himself roll back the sealed stone from the sepulchre; but of “miracles” and things *impossible* I needs must doubt till they are proved. And if ye would confess it, ye have your doubts also, even as mine. Nevertheless had I served the “Nazarene” and dwelt with Him as ye have done, as Man and Friend and Teacher merely; I never would have left Him to His enemies, or denied Him, as this Peter whom despite his late repentance, I despise!’

He spoke with force and eloquence, and Peter, shuddered and paled at his rebuke.

‘Thou strange ruffian!’ he said tremulously —

‘Canst thou not understand the terrors and the hesitations of a man’——

‘I can understand all things,’ interrupted Barabbas fiercely, ‘save cowardice! Lo, if this Master whom ye boast of is a god, and hath risen truly from the dead,—let Him but come and speak to me—to me, the wretched, sinful, doubting, fearing Barabbas,—let me know Him as He is, and what matter even if I die of the terror and the splendour of His presence! Doubt would shake my soul no more,—I would endure eternities of pain to prove His godhead! Ye have known Him, so ye say, and yet ye doubted and deserted Him!—lo, ye yourselves have made it seem that ye mistrusted Him,—for if ye did believe that He were God, why did ye all forsake Him?’

Great tears gathered in the eyes of the disciple called John.

‘Prithee, say no more, Barabbas!’ he murmured—
‘We know our faults; we are but men.’

‘True!’ said Barabbas mournfully—‘We are but men! We should be gods to serve a God; and some there be who swear we can become as gods, knowing

both good and evil if so we will it. But methinks we only choose to master half the lesson—Evil;—of Good there is little knowledge and less liking. I pray ye all to pardon me the roughness of my speech,—I am a sad, embittered, broken-hearted man, and all life looks upon me frowningly. And though I may not go with ye—I say “god-speed!” and—if ye meet your Lord, may your eyes have love enough to know Him when ye see Him! So—farewell!’

‘Stay!’ cried Peter—‘All thy reproaches shall not go unanswered! *Thou* knowest on whom should fall the rightful blame, though these my companions here are yet in ignorance. I told thee all,—thou and the stranger whom thou hadst with thee,—wherefore carry thy rebuke where most it is deserved, to that arch-traitress whom thy soul doth cherish with a secret passion, uncontrolled, despite her infamy! Ah, who will ever truly tell the story of the Lord’s betrayal! None!—for a woman-wanton is the dearest joy of man, and the very laws he makes protect her foulness, and defend his lust!’

‘Coward art thou still, Peter!’ retorted Barabbas hotly—‘Would’st thou shelter thine own weakness

behind that of woman?—'tis an unmanly deed! Does it make thy sin or the sin of Judas less that ye were so easily tempted by woman's voice and persuaded by woman's eyes? Nay! it doth prove your fickleness the more,—go to! bear thy part in crime without mean subterfuge; 'tis nobler to confess a sin than cover it'— Here he broke off abruptly, startled by a sudden movement among the disciples, who were all with one accord looking amazedly down the road in the direction of Gethsemane. He followed their wondering glances, and saw to his utter consternation the white-robed form of a woman flying forth like a phantom from under the sheltering shadows of the olive-trees. The fiery gold of her streaming hair flashing in the sun identified her at once to his grieved sight,—it was the frenzied Judith,—and behind her ran the Magdalen, making signals of anxiety and distress. Swaying to and fro, sometimes stumbling, anon rushing impetuously as though borne by a swift wind, the distracted girl fled along like some furiously hunted animal, till her course was interrupted by the presence of the disciples, and Barabbas, with whom she came suddenly

face to face. He, going close up to her, tried to take her gently by the hands, but she flung him off with a violent gesture and stood still, panting for breath and trembling. The very fury of mania possessed her; her face was livid and convulsed, her lips were blue and drawn in against her teeth in a thin unnatural line, and in startling contrast to the pallor of her features, her great dark eyes blazed with a feverish thirsty glare as of some inward longing unappeased.

‘Where is the King?’ she cried shrilly, fixing a wild look on Peter—‘I have been in His garden—all among the flowers and the palms,—but He is not there! He has come out of the grave, they say,—devils and angels alike whisper it,—nevertheless though I seek Him I cannot find Him! But surely He must be found,—I have need of Him speedily, for I must ask Him to pardon Judas,—Judas frowns at me and will not be consoled!’

Here, interrupting herself, she flung her long hair backward over her shoulders, and smiling faintly, looked from one to the other of the disciples in a sort of vague anticipation and inquiry. Peter’s stern eyes rested upon her austere and without com-

passion,—she shrank a little away from him,—and again her glances wandered wildly, till a sudden magnetism appeared to attract them fixedly to the calm fair face of John. With a sharp cry she threw herself on her knees before him, lifting her clasped hands and still smiling piteously.

‘Good sir, be gentle with me! I am full of sin, and I have never been merciful to any man,—yet for my brother’s sake I must find the King! I know He cannot have gone so very far away, for last night I beheld Him in a vision. He slept, all white and cold, upon a bed of stone; the blood-stained thorns were in His golden hair,—the grave-clothes were His robes of state,—but even as He lay thus, a great world came to pay Him homage. A strange world—a vast world,—the world of the Dead!—they gathered round His couch and smiled upon Him,—their shadowy forms grew warm and colourful with life,—and as they came they chanted all together—“Thus is Death slain that we may live!” And hearken, sir, hearken!—Judas was there,—Judas, with gentle eyes and smiling lips, but ah!—he never looked on me!—he never smiled at me!—but I was glad, because

the cruel mark had gone from round his throat, and he seemed happy, though I, his sister, stood apart, alone! And presently the white King rose!—'twas marvellous!—His thorny crown was changed to stars!—His grave-clothes glittered into light and fire!—and like the morning sun itself He shone upon the world! And all the buried men and women lived again,—yea, all the earth was full of life and joy,—but there was one strange terror in the glory, for I heard a voice proclaim with thunder—"From henceforth every soul created is immortal; Life rules the universe for ever, and only thou, Judith Iscariot, art dead!"'

She gave vent to a shuddering moan, and writhing herself to and fro, clung to the mantle of John as though for protection. He did not repulse or try to raise her, but stood silently, gazing down upon her crouching figure in solemn compassion. Mary Magdalene had also approached, and now bent above the unfortunate girl with whispered words of more than a sister's tenderness, but Judith seemed unconscious of her presence, and still lifted her appealing face to John.

‘Think of it, gentle sir!’ she murmured sobbingly; ‘Is it not hard, very hard, that I, only I, out of all Creation, should thus be dead? In all the joy and moving of the world, that my heart should be frozen thus and still?—that I should feel no love, no hope, no memory? Yet it is true!—I know the curse has fallen upon me, for I am stricken dull and foolish,—I am even as a stone upon the road for every foot to spurn at! Beauty I had,—but ’twas of no avail to me; love I had, but love was powerless to defend me; and lo, while all the universe rejoices in its life eternal, I, Judith, must remain the one dead soul accursed,—unless—unless, so the whisperers in the air tell me, I may haply find the King. For though He looked in anger on me once, ’tis said He hath great tenderness, and patience more than all men,—He will perchance forgive. He is not in His garden,—I have sought Him everywhere, and Judas has not come. Help me, friend, I do beseech thee!—take me to the presence of the King,—for Judas is angered with me, —Judas must be consoled!’

XLV

SHE knelt,—her wide-open wild eyes upturned ;
—and as she finished her incoherent appeal,
she lifted the roughly twisted Cross she had made,
and held it close up before the wondering gaze of
the ‘beloved’ disciple.

‘Will this not move thee?’ she asked plaintively.

John started as from a dream.

‘Is not this the sister of dead Judas?’ he said
softly and in amazement—‘What doeth she with
such a symbol?’

‘Alas, who knows! and who can follow the
wanderings of her distempered fancy!’ answered
Barabbas, struggling with the tears that rose in his
throat—‘Her brother’s death hath maddened her
thus. Prithee have patience!—I would we could
persuade her to her father’s house!’ And he looked

distressfully at the Magdalen, who shook her head sorrowfully.

‘I fear me ’twill be difficult,’—she said—‘She hath the strangest fits of passion. She was quite happy in the garden till a little while ago, then suddenly convulsed, she rose and shrieked aloud, and wringing her hands fled swiftly from me. I followed fast,—and she ran forth into the high-road thus demented, nor would she let me touch her.’

They spoke in low tones, and Judith heeded nothing that was said. She remained on her knees, looking at John.

‘Where is the King?’ she reiterated.

Before John could reply, Peter suddenly advanced.

‘If thou dost speak of Him whom thou didst aid the priests to crucify,’—he said sternly—‘thou dost ask news of Him in vain. He doth not answer to the call of the wicked, and for the treacherous He hath no sympathy. Shall a murderer ask for his victim?—shall he that hath wilfully wrested life from the innocent expect that life to live again? Cry, Judith, to the heavens, for the King of Heaven

is there,—but such as thou art, wilt find Him on this earth no more!’

‘How canst thou tell, Peter?’ interposed John quickly—‘Thou art too harsh,—thou should’st not too presumptuously declare the ways of the Divine! Hast thou no pity?—Our Master had, when we were with Him, and of a truth methinks He would have comforted this broken and afflicted soul!’

‘Thy Master had strange servants!’ said Barabbas hotly—‘And this Peter doth commiserate his own sins only!’

‘Hush, oh hush!’ prayed the Magdalen fervently; ‘Dispute not now among yourselves!—see ye not a change in her? Judith! Judith!’

Judith had risen slowly to her feet, and was now standing upright, though feebly,—the hot sunshine fell full on the uncovered splendour of her hair and made it appear to burn like flame, but her face was wan and sad as the face of the dying. She had turned her eyes upon Peter, though with an almost unseeing look.

‘Thou hast a harsh note in thy voice’—she said faintly—‘Methinks thou didst never love a woman,

not even the mother that bore thee. Who art thou? —I know thee not, but sure am I thou wilt do cruel things in the world. With love, one is cruel,—but without it,—ah!—what is it to be without love?—I cannot tell, for I have lost what love I had, and I am dead. Alas, alas! It seems that none of ye know where the King hath now His dwelling,—I must go seek Him further. 'Tis useless to waste time in cursing me,—'twere kinder to bestow on me some hope.'

Here she staggered slightly, and seemed about to fall,—Mary Magdalene caught her round the waist. 'I am not well'—she went on—'There is such a strange weight at my heart,—and an aching heat upon my brows. Thou'—and turning, she put her arms about Mary's neck and looked her full in the eyes—'thou art my friend,—we were in the King's garden together, were we not?—two sinful, sorrowful weak women,—but we did not find Him there. Had He seen us He would have pitied us. And Judas did not come. He promised,—but he did not come.'

'Didst thou not say that he would come at sunset?' murmured Mary soothingly—'Tis not yet sunset.'

‘Not yet sunset!’ and Judith sighed, opening her beautiful pained eyes in mournful languor and bewilderment—‘Surely it should be near, for the skies are growing very dark,—it will soon be difficult to see one’s way’——

She broke off, gasping for breath; the disciples exchanged grave and alarmed glances, while Barabbas, seized by a spasm of fear, sprang forward.

‘Judith, speak to me!’ he cried.

She looked at him, smiling a little, but still clinging to Mary.

‘Who is this?’ she asked—‘He calls me by my name,—then surely he should know me.’

‘Judith, Judith! I am Barabbas!’ And he stretched out his arms towards her in a passion of despair and yearning agony.

Feebly she extended one hand to him.

‘Art thou indeed Barabbas?’ she said, with an echo of the old sweetness in her failing voice—‘Alas, Barabbas!—Believe me, I am sorry for thee. Thou didst love me!’

He grasped the little hand convulsively, and turned away to hide the scalding tears that fell. A great

compassion for him was expressed in the earnest faces of the disciples,—even Peter's rugged features softened, and a troubled shame and remorse for his recent harshness appeared to vex his shifting and uneasy spirit.

Just then a terrible paroxysm of trembling seized Judith's limbs,—Mary Magdalene could scarcely support her, and appealed to the others, with a frightened glance, for aid. Barabbas and three of the disciples went to her assistance, but the insane Judith was possessed of unnatural strength, and twisted and writhed about with so much fury that it seemed as though her whole frame were being torn and tortured by devils, and they were afraid to seize her by force lest this action should increase her frenzy.

‘Lay her down under the trees by the roadside’—said Peter, in gentler tones than he had yet used—‘’Tis a feverish convulsion, and in the shade and cool, it will pass quickly.’

But it was impossible to move her a step. She stood, clutching Mary, obstinately forcing herself to remain upright, and fighting against the physical

anguish that was gradually overcoming her,—her eyes were fixed, and stared straight upward to the cloudless sky. All at once the horrible tremors ceased,—her face flushed suddenly into the radiance of its former dazzling beauty, and with a violent movement, she thrust the Magdalen aside. Like some great queen she lifted her head with an imperial gesture, and her eyes flashed fire.

‘What news bring ye from the city?’ she demanded—‘Do they mourn there or rejoice for the death of Caiaphas?’

‘Alas, Judith, dream not so wildly!’—murmured Barabbas quickly—‘Caiaphas is not dead,—some enemy hath wounded him in the night,—but he doth live, and will live on,—trouble not thyself!’

As he spoke she looked at him strangely,—and over her features came a swift dusky pallor as of death.

‘What! Caiaphas doth live and will live on?’ she cried—‘He is not dead? Then upon him, O God of Israel, send down thine everlasting curse!—let loose on him the fiends of darkest hell! Betrayer, seducer, liar and self-seeking hypocrite, remember, O just God,

remember the sins of this thy so-called righteous servant in the Holy Place, and let thy judgments meet the measure of his vileness! Not upon Judas'—and she raised her arms aloft in passionate appeal—'not upon Judas, nor on any blind and ignorant sinner, visit thy vengeance, O dread Lord, but on thy priest, who in pretence of serving the Divine hath murdered it! A curse on Caiaphas!—the curse of dead Judas,—the curse of dying Judith!—the never-lifting curse of the wretched, who are led by a priest's Lie out of Heaven, into Hell!'

Dilating with her inward passion, she looked like a pale fierce prophetess denouncing the evils of the time,—reason for the moment seemed to have returned to her,—her voice was clear, her sentences connected,—and Peter and the others stared upon her amazed, awed and fascinated. But the rush of her wild eloquence exhausted her,—she lost breath, and looked vaguely about her, groping with her hands in a blind way, as though she had become suddenly enveloped in darkness. All at once she sprang forward eagerly with an impetuous grace and swiftness that caused those around her to fall hastily

back, except Barabbas, who still tried to hold and support her, though she with a gesture of her old pride and scorn motioned him away. Alone on the white dusty road she stood in a listening attitude,—her eyes glittering, her lips apart; evidently she heard, or thought she heard something that to the others who watched her was but silence. The sun poured straightly down upon her,—she looked like a fair startled sylph in the amber glow of the burning Eastern noonday,—gradually an expression of surprise and then of rapture lighted her pallid face,—she lifted her gaze slowly, and with seeming wonder and incredulity, fixed her eyes on the near grassy slope of the Mount of Olives, where two ancient fig-trees twining their gnarled boughs together made an arch of dark and soothing shade. Pointing thither with one hand, she smiled,—and once more her matchless beauty flashed up through form and face like a flame.

‘Lo there!’ she exclaimed joyously—‘How is it that ye could not find Him? There is the King!’

Throwing up her arms, she ran eagerly along a few steps, . . . tottered, . . . then fell face forward

in the dust, and there lay ; . . . motionless for ever ! She had prayed for the pardon of Judas,—she had sought—and found—the ‘ King ’ !

Barabbas, Mary Magdalene and the disciples quickly surrounded the prone figure shrouded in its gold hair, but ere they could raise it, the sound of a horse’s hoofs galloping fast down the road came closer and closer, and finally stopped. A man’s voice called out anxiously—

‘ What have ye there ? Need ye any service ? ’

They looked up,—and a solemn silence fell upon them. For it was Iscariot. He had just returned from a vain search for his daughter in the villages of Bethphage and Bethany. In one keen glance he read in their awestricken faces his own new misery, and dismounting from his horse he dispersed the little group with a single tragic gesture of supreme despair. The white figure fallen in the dust, the lustrous wonder of the hair that covered it as with a mantle, swam before his eyes,—flinging himself down he clutched wildly at the corpse of that fair child of his, who had been to his heart above all earthly things beloved.

‘Judith!’ he cried.

Then, slowly and shudderingly he lifted the body and turned the face upward to the light, . . . alas, the piteous beauty of that face!—what sadness, and what wonder in its fixed grave smile! So strongly too did it resemble the face of the dead Judas, that had it not been for the wealth of woman’s hair falling about it, it might have been taken for the fine fair remorseful countenance of that self-slain disciple. Yet a certain vague joy rested on the quiet features;—one little hand pressed against the bosom, held a cross; this Iscariot saw, and wrenching it from the stiffening fingers, flung it in the dust.

‘Get hence!’ he cried fiercely—‘Ye madmen of Galilee, get hence! Out of my sight, and linger not to triumph in my misery! Behold, my house is desolate!—I have no more place or honour in the world! Rejoice at that, ye enemies of Israel! What care I for your promised heaven!—ye have reft from me the joy of earth! What are your boasted miracles! your resurrections from the grave!—will ye give me back my children? Will ye raise up my son, self-slaughtered for your Prophet’s sake?

Will ye restore to me this maid, the daughter of my blood, the treasure of my care? Nay! ye are liars all!—ye have no power to comfort the afflicted, ye cruel preachers of a loveless creed,—ye cowards and accurst! Leave me, I say!—leave me . . . alone with my dead!’

And clasping the body of his daughter in his arms, he laid his grey head upon her still breast and wept,—wept as only strong men weep when they are broken-hearted.

Awed and troubled, and vaguely perplexed too, by the mystery of a grief and pain too great as it seemed for human or divine consolation, the disciples slowly moved away, the Magdalen accompanying them sorrowfully, her face veiled to hide her tears,—and only Barabbas remained beside the stricken father to share with him his bitter agony. Once Peter looked back and seemed to consider whether he should speak. But he hesitated,—for what, after all, could he say? He had not the secret of his Divine Master, who by a mere look could calm a tempest. True, he might have said ‘Be patient, Iscariot! God will comfort thee!’

What! This, to a Pharisee and usurer? Never! Let him, instead of children, hug his bags of ill-gotten gold,—what Jew with wealth hath need of other comfort? So Peter thought; yet there was an uneasiness in his mind; his Master, he well knew, would not have acted thus, and he was by his lack of broad sympathy, already falsifying and distorting the Divine example. Tormented by, yet wilfully deaf to the teasing whisper of conscience, he walked on 'to meet the Lord' by the road to Galilee, half hoping, half fearing, half doubting, half believing, an image of the future on which he was destined to set his lasting mark. Meanwhile John lingered a moment,—his earnest gaze rested compassionately on the tragic group beneath the olive-boughs,—the aged Jew clasping his dead daughter, his grey locks mingling with her gold,—and the rugged dark figure of Barabbas standing near;—then, stooping, he raised reverently from the dust the cross Iscariot had thrown there, kissed it, laid it against his breast, and with fair head bent musingly, and eyes full of dreams, went slowly on his way.

XLVI

N EARLY a week had elapsed since the miracle of the Resurrection of the Crucified had been reported in Jerusalem. The high-priest Caiaphas was recovering rapidly from his well-nigh deadly wound, and had so far carried out certain secret plans of his as to have had the centurion Galbus, together with his companion Maximus, sent hastily out of Judæa and back to Rome. Petronius too, the other centurion, suspected of sympathy with the followers of the 'Nazarene,' was likewise dismissed,—but all three officers had no sooner reached their native country than they were at once promoted in the Roman legions, by whose good office and influence no one knew, unless the stranger Melchior who wore the Emperor's signet had something to do with the matter. Meanwhile, it was generally understood

among the Jews that the body of the 'Prophet out of Galilee' had been stolen,—moreover, that the authorities of the Sanhedrim council were already on the track of the criminal concerned in the robbery. Public attention, however, had been somewhat diverted from the matter by the grand and picturesque obsequies of Judith Iscariot. Never had the city seen such a sight as the long procession of white-robed, lily-wreathed maidens who attended the corpse of 'the fairest woman in Judæa' to its last resting-place beside that of her ill-fated brother. White flowers and white draperies symbolised to the people's gaze the dead girl's pure virginity,—and though some shook their heads and shrugged their shoulders and whispered rumours of scandal, none dared speak boldly of the truths they knew. For Iscariot was a power in Jerusalem,—his usurer's grip held fast the fortunes of many a struggling household,—the secret fear of him kept would-be rancorous tongues mute. But the proud priest Caiaphas hid his burning eyes in the pillows of his sick-bed, and smarted in his guilty conscience as he heard the sound of the dreary funeral chant passing by his palace walls,—yet he

maintained a rigid silence,—and his pale wife Rachel, coldly watching him, also held her peace. Between them lay the full and true knowledge of Judith's deep dishonour,—nevertheless, like the murderous dagger she had used, which now was rusting at the bottom of a well, that knowledge remained buried in their hearts by unspoken yet mutual agreement.

All the disciples and followers of the 'Nazarene,' men and women alike, had left Jerusalem, some for fear of the priests, some to return to their own homes in the country districts,—and the city inhabitants were beginning to fall back into their usual methods of living,—methods which had been so strangely disorganised by late events. Joseph of Arimathea had had his tomb, now rendered so sacred, hewn open from the top, that it might be more readily examined within and without, and, disgusted with the callousness and suspicions of the priests, himself entirely believing in the Divine Resurrection from the Dead, sold his fine house in Jerusalem, gave all the proceeds to the poor, and departed to his native humble town of Arimathea, there to dwell in retirement for good. Among other gossip of the town it was rumoured

that Pilate, the governor, had written letters to the Emperor Tiberius, asking to be recalled to Rome on the plea of ill-health, but of this, nothing was known for certain.

It was about the eighth day after the first Easter,—and over the little village of Nazareth the sun was sinking. A blaze of royal gold and purple falling aslant from the west reddened the outlying fertile valley and surrounding cornfields, and poured warm splendour through the open doorway of a small dark dwelling where sat an aged man alone at a carpenter's bench, working busily ; though sunset was the usual sign for rest from labour. He was finishing a wooden cradle, of which every portion was panelled into squares of curious and elaborate carving. His wrinkled hands manipulated the carving tools with singular swiftness and dexterity ; and as he fashioned a flower or a leaf in the design, he worked with the minute and fastidious care of an artist who loves the labour he has chosen. Beside him on the bench lay a fresh-gathered branch of field-lilies,—he was copying these on a square of wood with extraordinary fidelity. The red glow of the skies illumined his bent, roughly-clad figure, and

set a rose-halo round his snow-white hair,—he was completely absorbed in his toil,—so much so that he did not hear an approaching slow footstep at his door, or see the shadow which darkened it and partially robbed him of the sun.

‘Art thou Joseph, the carpenter of Nazareth?’ said a harsh sad voice, suddenly addressing him—‘And dost thou work thus peacefully without mourning, thy son being dead yonder in Jerusalem?’

The old man started. Laying down the panel he was carving, he shaded his eyes with one hand from the light, and looked up dimly and wonderingly at his questioner. He saw before him a tall broad-shouldered man, dark and fierce-featured, travel-worn and dusty, with terrible black eyes that burned beneath his shaggy brows with the danger-fires born of long pent-up unshed tears.

‘What stranger art thou?’ he demanded—‘Why comest thou hither?’

‘I am an outcast of the world, by name Barabbas,’—and as the intruder gave this answer, he moved a step or two within the shed—‘Thus have I answered

thee straightway, but to me thou offerest no quick reply. I have come hither from Jerusalem, impelled by a desire to find thee and to speak with thee, if peradventure thou art he of whom the people tell me. Wherefore I ask again, art thou or art thou not Joseph, son of Jacob, a descendant of the House of David, and father of him who was called "the King of the Jews"?'

Rising from his bench, the venerable man confronted his importunate visitor.

'Yea, I am Joseph;'—he answered mildly.

Barabbas, gaunt and worn with sorrow, sleeplessness and fatigue, fixed upon him a piercing look as though he sought to read the inmost secrets of his soul.

'Surely thou art a poor and aged man'—he muttered faintly—'On the brink of the grave thy feet are treading;—with that darkness waiting for thee, that darkness in which we know not what may chance to us,—thou wilt not lie! I shall find truth in thee doubtless,—truth—truth at last'——

His voice failed him,—his eyes closed,—he dropped wearily on a low bench near the door. He had

travelled for two days with scarcely any rest or food, and in his exhausted condition it was some minutes before he perceived that Joseph was proffering him a wooden bowl full of pure cool water. He drank gratefully, and recovering himself a little he again turned his eyes on the imposing, reverend figure beside him.

‘I am Barabbas’—he repeated presently after a pause,—‘But perchance that name doth tell thee nothing. Hear then its meaning. I have been thief, rebel and murderer,—no good thing is there in my mind towards any man; by right and justice I should have been crucified instead of Him who was thy Son, for He was innocent, and I am guilty. But if thou knowest the world’s ways, this will not seem unto thee strange, for man’s laws are made to excuse man’s guilt,—and innocence is ever slain, being a virtue unrequired, an aggravation and reproach to wickedness. So hath it been in Jerusalem these past wild days,—and so methinks will it ever be, in all the labyrinths of this life. Freedom hath done me little service,—I have lived centuries of grief since the doors of my prison were unbarred,—I thirsted for my

liberty,—it came, but brought me naught but sorrow,—rather would I have died than suffered as I have suffered,—death did never seem to me so sweet and welcome as now,—God knoweth it! Thou lookest at me with most unmoved and placid face,—carest thou not that they have slain thy son?’

Joseph said no word, but stood immovably erect,—the sunset-glow shining warmly about him and widening its ring of glory round his silvery hair.

‘Howbeit now it seems they have not slain Him after all, and thou perchance dost know it’—went on Barabbas, watching for some change of expression in the old man’s peaceful countenance—‘And all the world is growing mad with talk of “miracles.” He hath arisen living from the dead; and hath appeared to His followers—part of this tale is true, but has no “miracle” in it, inasmuch as I am sure He never died! He swooned upon the Cross and recovered in the tomb, and doubtless will appear to men for many years to come, and thus will be confirmed the story of His resurrection. Markest thou this? No Divinity was in this Man, nor any sort of “miracle;” thou, Joseph, dost not assume Divinity for the child

begotten of thy will and born of thy blood in mortal fashion, as all creatures of mortality are born?’

He had spoken in tones that were purposely cold and matter-of-fact, yet under his assumed composure there was concealed a keen and painful anxiety. Still silent, Joseph stood, a regal figure, bathed in the purple and gold reflections of the evening skies. At last Barabbas could bear the suspense no longer,—his suppressed impatience broke forth in a kind of fury.

‘Speak, man, speak!’ he cried passionately—‘Oh, if thou knewest my tortures! Lo, I have seen this Man,—this “King of the Jews,” in all His fair, heroic, appalling beauty! His face, His voice, His aspect haunt me!—His patient eyes consume my soul! Man or God, whiche’er He be, in very truth His looks were more of God than Man,—His tenderness was more than human! Men are cruel to each other,—He was pitiful;—men complain,—He never murmured! I watched Him die,—He made a glory out of pain!—and on the morn when it was said He had arisen from His grave, I, even I myself, saw Him walking softly ’mid the shadows of the dawn

and speaking—ay! to whom, thinkest thou, did He speak? To a broken-hearted woman whose sins He had forgiven! 'Twas marvellous,—no man newly escaped from the grave would have stopped for this methinks,—yet God, we are taught, is vengeful,—wherefore it seems this “Nazarene” is neither man nor god! Oh that I knew Him as He truly is!—I would dare all things for this one instruction! Lo, I have pleaded even with His mother, thy wife, praying her to tell me of His birth, which now is also said to be a “miracle”—but she was dumb, even as thou art, and while I looked upon her a great light shone about her face,—a light mystic and wonderful, that filled my soul with fear. Even such a splendour did invest the “Nazarene” when I beheld Him in the Hall of Judgment,—beauty and light seemed portion of His nature. Nevertheless the terror of this mystery doth madden me; hence I have come to thee;—speak thou the truth, Joseph, as simple man and honest, and tell me all thou canst of this same Jesus, the wonder of Judæa,—thou, as His father, must know everything concerning Him, even from the very hour that He

was born into the world! Wherefore, if only out of mercy to my pain and ignorance, I do beseech thee, speak!’

‘What can I tell thee, tortured soul,’ said Joseph at last, in solemn compassionate accents—‘Save that the Man Divine was not my Son?’

Barabbas sprang up and caught him convulsively by the arm.

‘Not thy Son!’ he echoed—‘Was not Mary thy wife? Hast thou no children?’

‘None who call Her their mother,’—replied Joseph; ‘Children indeed I have, but these were born to me in early manhood by my first wedded wife long dead. Mary I knew not save as one removed from earth,—a heavenly Virgin, whose white purity and singular destiny I was commanded to defend.’

‘But didst thou not espouse her?’

‘Even as I was bidden;’—answered Joseph simply—‘And worshipped her as Angel and as Queen!’

‘Ah, now thou also dost confuse me with vain words’—exclaimed Barabbas half angrily—

‘Why dost thou name her thus royally? Many of the people say she was a stray maiden out of Egypt.’

A dreamy rapt look came into Joseph’s deep-set eyes.

‘If she was of any earthly land she was of Egypt,’ he said musingly—‘And to Egypt I was bidden to take her for protection when Herod the tyrant threatened the life of her young Child. When first I met her, ’twas in spring,—a quiet evening in the month of May;—she walked alone across the fields, like a phantom of the moon with a strange light in her hair, and a stranger glory in her eyes!—methought that I had met an angel out of heaven, and down among the flowerets at her feet I knelt adoringly!’ He paused in a sort of ecstasy—then resumed calmly—‘’Twas at her will and wish that I espoused her in the sight of man; once, to speak truth, I hesitated, fearing evil,—but then again the bidding came, and I obeyed it.’

‘Why speakest thou of bidding or forbidding?’ cried Barabbas, perplexed and baffled—‘What meanest thou? Was not this Jesus born of Mary?’

—and didst thou not espouse her, woman or angel or queen ;—no matter whence she came or at what hour, was she not thine ?’

‘No!’ answered Joseph with sudden and passionate vehemence—‘Dare not to utter such a blasphemy! She was never mine,—never, by look or word or touch or breath! The angels were her friends,—they sang to her from the furthest stars on the night of her Child’s birth ;—I was her faithful servant only!’

‘Thou ravest!’ and Barabbas, strung up to a nervous pitch of excitement, could scarcely restrain his deepening sense of incredulity and anger—‘Thou art as mad as all the rest of those concerned in this strange business! But I have come to thee for truth; and truth I will wrest from thee despite evasion! Thou poor, frail man!—dost thou not fear death?—and wilt thou on the very edge of thy near tomb, play with delusion, and pronounce a lie? Thou knewest of the birth of Mary’s Child ;—if He was not thy Son, whose Son was He?’

A sudden shadow swept the floor,—the sun had sunk ; there was a momentary dread silence that

made itself almost felt. The chill grey of the evening crept stealthily over the outside landscape, and in the semi-gloom of the hut, the two men stood facing each other, speechless and trembling.

‘Whose Son’—repeated Barabbas in a faint awed whisper—‘was He?’

A vague terror and bewilderment clouded Joseph’s features. Raising his hands with an eloquent gesture of solemn earnestness, he looked full at the daring questioner.

‘In the name of the great God that made us,’ he said tremulously—‘I swear I never knew! I never knew!—I only . . . dreamed!’

As he spoke, a flashing light poured itself swiftly aslant in a golden blaze athwart the deepening dusk;—affrighted at the sudden brilliancy, he turned quickly round towards the open doorway, . . . then with a wild cry;—

‘Lo there!—there!’ he gasped—‘Behold Him where He stands! Ask Him,—not me! Question Him concerning that to which no mortal man hath answer!’

And falling to the ground he covered his face,—
while Barabbas staggered back, amazed, blinded,
breathless, and smitten with terror ;—before him, in
silent, royal, radiant beauty stood—the ‘ Nazarene ’ !

XLVII

THE same lustrous Face that had shone in pale splendour on the Cross,—the same deep Eyes that had looked their dying pardon on the world,—the same, the very same!—the one recognisable Beloved through all ages,—‘the same yesterday, to-day and for ever.’ And yet how transfigured was that Human Semblance! how permeated through and through with the glory of the Divine! Light streamed above and below the Kingly Form that seemed clad in cloud and fire,—rays of celestial gold flashed round the god-like brows; all the majesty of morning, noon and night, and all the mystic secrets of creation, were centred in the lightning glances that with power shed forth love,—love unutterable and vast,—love beyond any mortal comprehension,—love flung out illimitably as sunshine, as widely as the

sweet ungrudging air! Fearing greatly, but *not* doubting the testimony of his own sight and sense, Barabbas knelt and gazed appealingly at the supernal Vision, asking himself the while whether it were a phantom of his mind, or the reflex of a marvellous Reality! Seeking to be convinced, he forced himself to note the trivial things of every day around him,—the carpenter's bench, the branch of lilies lying across it, the implements of wood-carving,—all these evidences of practical toil and daily life he realised in every detail. There too, a little apart from him, knelt the aged Joseph, his face covered in his mantle,—a figure real and tangible and earthly; and out through the open doorway, beyond the Angel-stature of the Shining One, stretched the cool length of the meadow opposite, and the further corn-fields dimly seen in the darkening eve. It was no dream then!—the world was the world still, and not a chaos of spectral fancies; this great 'King' standing patiently upon the humble threshold of His childhood's habitation was no phantom, but a glorious living Truth,—and as Barabbas gradually became conscious of this, he prayed inwardly that he might

die at so supreme a moment of transcendent ecstasy! And presently he felt a yearning impulse to draw nearer to the Divine Presence;—and at the first thrill of this desire in his soul, the Vision seemed to smile a welcome. Nearer and nearer still he crept, with beating heart and struggling breath,—he a poor mortal sinner dared to approach Immortal Purity,—till at last he could almost feel the quivering of the lambent light that glittered in a golden aureole round the risen Form of the world's Redeemer.

‘Master, is it Thou!’ he whispered—‘Thou, in very truth! why hast Thou come to me when I have doubted Thee? Punish me, I beseech Thee, with the judgment due unto my sin and disbelief;—I am unfit for life or death;—here at Thy feet I fain would perish utterly!’

Deep silence answered him,—such tender silence as soothes the weary into rest. Trembling, he ventured to lift his eyes,—the wondrous love and glory of the Countenance he looked upon filled him with rapture,—his long-imprisoned suffering soul awoke at last to the full consciousness of an immortal destiny.

‘I believe! I believe in Thee, O Thou Divine!’ he cried—‘Let me follow Thee wheresoe’er Thou goest! Let me not lose Thee, the one Truth in a false world!—Take me with Thee, the servant of Thy will, beyond the things of earth and time,—no matter where—all must be well if Thou dost guide!’

As he thus made his passionate supplication, the luminous Figure moved slowly backward,—turned,—and passed floatingly in a path of light across the meadows,—Barabbas hastily rose to his feet and followed fast. Seeing nothing, knowing nothing, remembering nothing, save that crowned Wonder of the Ages that glided on before him, he brushed his way through fragrant flowers, and seemed to walk on air. A great joy possessed him,—such joy as once he would have deemed impossible to win,—the soft breeze blowing against his face felt like a caress from heaven,—he was dimly aware that a few stars were hanging like drops of dew in the dusky ether,—but the exaltation of his spirit was such that earth and all its manifold beauty weighed but as one drop in the wave of ecstasy that absorbed his every sense. All at once, on the shadowy bend of a little hill, the

radiant Vision paused, . . . then like a cloud dissolving into air, suddenly vanished !

Barabbas halted abruptly and looked about him. He was already some miles away from Nazareth ; and there was darkness before him where there had been light. But happiness stayed within his soul and he was not in any way anxious or disheartened. The great ' King ' had disappeared, but what then !—His departure was but temporary,—He lived and He would come again. Exulting in the joy of faith, Barabbas raised his eyes to the quiet heaven, and wondered whether there were truly such a thing as misery ?—Could man be wretched with a God for his friend, and the certainty of life immortal ? Who would sit down and grieve for loss of love, for death or ill fortune in the world, when all evil was destined to be changed to good in the end ? And the once sorrowful and embittered Barabbas was content,—his doubts were set at rest for ever.

' 'Twas a God they slew ! ' he said — ' 'Tis a God that is arisen from the grave ! And to that God, the Christ and Saviour of mankind, I render up my soul ! '

He uttered the words aloud, in the full belief that

they were heard. And though no answer came in mortal speech, there was bestowed upon him the sweetest sense of rest and peace and gladness his life had ever known. Cheerily and in perfect confidence he moved onward in the path where he had found himself set, according to the following of the 'Master ;' it led straight over the hills and back to Jerusalem. As he went, he resolved his plans. He would return to his strange acquaintance Melchior, who had always bidden him to believe in the Divinity of the 'Nazarene,' and who had placed no obstacles whatever in the way of his endeavouring to find out truth for himself, and to him first he would narrate his adventure at Nazareth. Then he would declare his faith, not only to Melchior but to every one who asked him concerning it,—he would show no hesitation or shame in the full confession of his happy change. What the result would be he did not consider,—the inward spiritual strength he felt made him totally indifferent to earthly consequences. The cruelty, the rancour and malice of men were powerless to touch him henceforth ; for the bitterest suffering, the most agonising martyrdom, would seem easy of endurance to one who

had truly seen the Christ, knowing that it was Christ indeed !

Of Joseph, to whom he had paid so abrupt a visit, he thought no more. Could he have known what had chanced, the shadow of a vague regret might in part have clouded his own personal joy. Some people of Nazareth going early to their labour in the cornfields noticed that the familiar and reverend figure of the old man was not seen at work as usual, and they straightway went to enquire the cause. They found him resting easily on the ground ; his white head leaning against the carpenter's bench, on which a branch of lilies lay slowly withering,—his eyes were closed in apparent deep and placid slumber. Two of his sons came in and strove to rouse him ; and not till they had lifted him up and carried him out to the open air, where they laid him down on the grass among the nodding field-flowers, with face upturned to the sun, did they discover that he had quietly passed away into the living splendour of eternal things, where age is turned to youth, and the darkest 'dreams' make their meanings clear.

XLVIII

THE broad lustre of a full moon spread itself like powdered silver over the walls and turrets of Jerusalem on the night Barabbas returned thither from his journey to Nazareth. He arrived late, and the gates of the city were locked, but he succeeded in rousing a sleepy watchman who came out of the guard-room in answer to his summons, and who was about to unbar a side-portal and let him through, when suddenly pausing in his intent, he rubbed his drowsy eyes and stared, astonished.

‘Why, art thou not Barabbas?’ he exclaimed.

‘Yea, truly am I! What then? Hast business with me?’

But the watchman gave him no direct reply. Dropping the bolt he had just withdrawn back into its place, he shouted aloud—

‘Ho there! Waken, ye lazy rascals, and come forth! Here is the man ye seek,—Barabbas!’

There followed a hoarse shout, a hasty trampling of feet and the clash of armour, and almost before the bewildered Barabbas could realise what had happened, he was surrounded by soldiers, seized and taken prisoner. Perplexed but not dismayed, he made no effort to escape. He glanced from one to the other of his captors,—they were Romans and all strangers to him.

‘What jest is this?’ he demanded—‘Why do ye suddenly maltreat me thus? Surely ye know the people’s vote hath set me free,—for what cause am I again a captive?’

‘Hold thy peace, ruffian!’ said one of the men angrily—‘’Tis not for criminals to question law!’

‘Full well I know I am a criminal’—responded Barabbas patiently—‘Nevertheless by law my crimes were lately pardoned. Of what new fault am I accused?’

‘Of a base attempt to murder the high-priest Caiaphas!’—answered an officer who seemed to be the leader of the band—‘He hath nearly died of a

deadly wound inflicted by a secret assassin, and he doth swear thou art the man! Moreover thou art also judged guilty of connivance with the followers of the "Nazarene," in plot to steal His body from the tomb officially sealed. Thou wert seen in converse with a woman of ill fame named Magdalen,—thou wert also in the company of Simon Peter,—and again, certain comrades-at-arms of ours met thee on the morning when the corpse of the "Nazarene" was missing, on the high-road to the sepulchre. These be proofs enough against thee, remembering thy former reputation!—and for these things thou shalt surely die."

Barabbas heard all this with a curious passiveness.

'Caiaphas doth accuse me thus?' he asked.

'Caiaphas hath denounced thee unto Pilate, and most furiously demands thy punishment'—was the reply—'Question thy fate no more; but come thou with us quietly, and fight not uselessly against thy destiny.'

Barabbas smiled. The plans of Caiaphas were singularly transparent reading! To shield the dead Judith Iscariot and himself from suspicion and slander, he had cunningly devised this false accusation against

an already known criminal,—moreover he was hereby able to indulge his own private spite and vengeance against Barabbas for ever having been one of Judith's many lovers. The additional charge made,—that of stealing the body of the Crucified from the tomb,—was to throw dust in the people's eyes, and silence, if possible, all rumours respecting the miracle of the Resurrection. The whole situation was perfectly clear,—but the victim of the high-priest's crafty scheme was in no wise disconcerted by evil circumstance. Addressing the officer who had condescended to give him an explanation of the cause of his sudden arrest, he said gently—

‘Friend, be assured that whatsoever my destiny I am prepared to meet it!’—and he held out his wrists that they might be more easily manacled—‘I am innocent this time of the deeds whereof I am accused,—howbeit, innocence doth count as nothing in the working of the world's laws,—wherefore I say, in the name of Jesus of Nazareth I am willing and ready to die!’

‘Rash fool!’ cried a soldier, striking him—‘Dare not to speak thus if thou dost value life! That

utterance of thine alone is blasphemy!—rank blasphemy enough to slay thee!’

‘And as I shall be slain, the manner of my speech doth little matter’—responded Barabbas tranquilly—‘Methinks a man should speak the truth that is within him, no matter whether death or life be imminent. Come, come! lead on! Quarrel not; this is no time for quarrelling. Ye are but the hirelings of the law, and cannot help but do the deeds that are commanded; let us be friends, good Romans!—I bear ye no ill-will. See!—I struggle not at all; ye are well within your right—ye must obey authority, albeit that authority be of earth and brief withal. I also must obey authority,—but the commands that I receive are changeless, and whosoever disobeys them is accurst!’

His eyes flashed a sombre glory as he spoke,—as the fetters were fastened on his wrists, he smiled again.

‘He is mad!’ said the soldiers, vaguely awed and exchanging wondering glances—‘They say he loved Judith Iscariot; perchance her death hath turned his brain.’

Barabbas heard them whispering thus among themselves, but gave no outward sign of attention. Judith Iscariot! Yes, he had loved her and he loved her still,—being dead, she was far dearer to him than if she had lived on. For she was now no longer Judith Iscariot,—she was a new creature, removed, indefinable and mystic,—a spirit released,—to good or evil, who could say?—but at any rate safe from the clamour of the world and the deeper taint of sin. Full of his own meditations, he maintained an absolute silence while the soldiers marched him quickly through the streets of the slumbering city to the gloomy prison, where the formidable gates that had so lately opened to release him, once more enclosed him, and shut out, as he felt for ever, all hope of earthly freedom.

‘What! Art thou back again, Barabbas?’ growled the gaoler, flashing his lantern in the prisoner’s eyes as he spoke—‘Well, well!—what folly will do for a man! ’Tis but a fortnight surely since thou wert *month* set at liberty, with all the people cheering thee,—yet thou hast such an ingrained bad nature thou canst not keep thee out of mischief. They crucified thy

yelping dog of a comrade, Hanan,—now it is likely they will crucify thee. What sayest thou to that for a finish to a rogue's career?'

Barabbas was mute. Sudden tears swam in his eyes,—he was thinking of a Supreme Figure, and a Divine Face, that on the Cross had made death glorious.

'Mum as a post,—sullen as a bear!' continued the gaoler gruffly—'Such as thou art are the worst characters. There is no hope for the surly and impenitent! Come hither and take possession of thy former cell—not a soul hath been in it, save perchance a starving rat, since thou wert there. Get thee in and make thy peace with Heaven!'

He opened the door of the very same wretched den in which Barabbas had already passed eighteen months of rebellious pain and misery,—and made as though he would thrust his captive in. Barabbas paused on the threshold, and looked him frankly in the face.

'Nay, be not rough with me!' he said gently—'There is no need for anger. This time I am innocent of all the faults whereof I am wrongfully

accused. Nevertheless I was most wrongfully released,—'twas the people's caprice and no true justice; wherefore I am ready now to atone. And surely as thou sayest, I will strive to make my peace with Heaven!'

A great beauty illumined his dark features,—his eyes were soft and earnest,—on his lips there rested a faint grave smile.

The gaoler stared at him, perplexed and dimly touched.

'An' thou art civil-tongued I will not vex thy last hours'—he said, in friendlier accents—'Thou'lt have a full day's penitence,—the Council will not sit to-morrow. Thou shalt not starve or thirst meanwhile,—for though I know thou art a rank villain, I'll see to that,—more I cannot do for thee,—so make the best of thy old lodging.'

He closed the iron door, bolting and barring it with heavy noise,—Barabbas listened, with an instinctive sense that for him it barred out the world eternally. Standing upright, he looked about him. The same dungeon!—the same narrow line of light piercing the thick obscurity! It fell from the moon,

a pure stream of silver,—and he sat down presently on a stone projection of the wall to watch it. In this attitude, with face lifted to the mild radiance, he was happy and at rest,—his wretched prison seemed beautiful to him,—and the prospect of a speedy death contained no terror but rather joy.

He passed the night tranquilly, in wakeful meditation, till the arrowy moonbeam in his cell changed to a golden shaft shot aslant from the rising sun. With the morning the gaoler brought him food and drink, and asked him whether he had slept.

‘Not I!’ he answered cheerfully—‘’Twas nigh on the approach of dawn when I came hither,—and the pleasure of my thoughts did banish slumber. Is it a fair day?’

‘Yea, ’tis a fair day,’—replied the gaoler, secretly marvelling at the composure of the captive—‘Though methinks thou should’st be little interested in the weather fair or foul. Thou hast another day and night to pass alive, in the pleasure of thy thoughts as thou sayest,—and after that thou wilt think no more! Knowest thou of what thou art suspect?’

‘Something have I heard,’—responded Barabbas—

‘But truly I suspect myself of more sins than Councils wot of!’

The gaoler stared and shrugged his shoulders.

‘Thou speakest in riddles,’ he said—‘And thou art altogether a strange rascal. Nevertheless I have made enquiry concerning thee. Thy case is hopeless—for ’tis Caiaphas who doth accuse thee.’

‘This doth not astonish me ;’—said Barabbas.

‘He hath reason then?’

‘Nay, he hath no reason. But I find nothing marvellous in that a priest should lie!’

The gaoler chuckled hoarsely.

‘I like thee for that saying!—rogue as thou art I like thee!’ and he rubbed his hands complacently—

‘Thou hast wit and sense withal!—Why, man, if God is anything of the likeness His priests would make Him out to be, He is the worst and most boastful tyrant that ever wreaked havoc on mankind! But take heed to thyself!—speak not thus rashly,—think on the “Nazarene” who set Himself against this priestcraft, and would have had it all abolished or made new had He obtained His will. He had a daring spirit, that young Man of Nazareth!—I myself

once heard Him say that it was not well to pray in public places to be seen of men. This was a blow direct at the keeping-up of temples, and fat priests to serve in them,—but look you He suffered for His boldness—and though 'twas said He was the Son of God, that did not save Him'——

‘Prithee be reverent in thy speech,’—interposed Barabbas gently — ‘Take heed thyself that thou blaspheme not! He was,—He is the Son of God!—the Risen from the Dead, the Saviour of the world,—as such I know and do acknowledge Him!’

‘By Israel, now do I see that thou art mad!’ cried the gaoler, backing away from him—‘Mad, raving mad!—touched by the fever of miracles that hath lately plagued Jerusalem; this “Nazarene” hath bewitched the very air! Prate to thyself of such follies, not to me;—I have no patience with dis-tempered brains. Prepare thee for thy cross to-morrow!—this will be more wholesome meditation for thy mind. Thou wilt see me no more;—I was sorry for thy ups and downs of fortune; thy brief glimpse of freedom finishing in new imprisonment;

but now,—verily as I live I think thee dangerous, and only fit to die!’

With these words he turned to leave the dungeon; Barabbas extended his fettered hands.

‘Farewell, friend!’ he said.

The gaoler looked round grudgingly and in ill-humour,—he was vexed with himself at the singular interest this man Barabbas had awakened in him, and he was ashamed to show it. He eyed the tall, muscular figure up and down severely, and met the full calm gaze of the dark earnest eyes,—then, as it were against his own will, he hastily grasped the hands and as hastily let them go.

‘Farewell!’ he responded curtly — ‘When thou diest, die bravely!’

And he disappeared, making more clanging noise than usual in his impatient bolting and barring of the door.

Left alone, Barabbas fell back into his former train of happy musing. Of the narrow discomfort, heat and darkness of his miserable dungeon he was scarcely conscious,—he was more triumphant than any conquering king in the fulness and joy of the

knowledge of things eternal. He had been lifted to that sublimity and supremacy of pure faith which alone enables a man to bear sorrow nobly, to dare all things, and hope all things ; the warm sweet certainty of something higher, grander, and lovelier than this life and all that it contains, nestled in his heart like a brooding bird and kept him glad and tranquil. At times he felt a strong desire to pray to that Divine Friend who after guiding him a little way had suddenly departed from him on the hills above Nazareth ;—to ask Him to bestow the beauty of His glorious Presence on His worshipping servant once again. But he checked this longing,—it seemed like a renewal of doubt,—as if he sought to be convinced and re-convinced of Truth immutably declared. To pray for further benefit after so much had been bestowed, would surely be both selfish and ungrateful. Therefore he made no appeal, but sat in solitary communing with his own soul, which now, completely aroused to the long-withheld consciousness of immortality, already aspired to its native sovereignty in glorious worlds unseen.

The day wore slowly onward,—and again the

night dropped down its dusky purple curtain patterned with the stars and moon. A pleasant sense of weariness overcame Barabbas at last,—he took no thought for the morrow on which it seemed likely he would be tried before Caiaphas, found guilty and put to death,—except in so far that he had resolved to make no defence, as he could not do so without implicating the dead Judith. Also, he had determined that when questioned concerning the supposed theft of the body of the Christ from the sepulchre, he would openly declare his faith, and would pronounce before all the scribes and Pharisees the adjuration ; ‘ *Jesus of Nazareth, Son of the living God!* ’ And with this very phrase upon his lips, he threw himself down upon the straw that was heaped in one corner of his dungeon, closed his eyes and fell fast asleep.

In his sleep he dreamed a pleasing dream. He fancied he was lying on a couch of emerald moss, softer than softest velvet,—that flowers of every hue and every fragrance were blossoming round him,—and that beside him sat a shining figure in white, weaving a crown of thornless roses. ‘Where have

I wandered?' he murmured—'Into what wondrous country of fair sights and sounds?' And the angelic shape beside him made musical response,—
'Thou hast reached a place of shelter out of storm,—and after many days of watching and of trouble we have persuaded thee hither. Rest now and take thy joy freely ;—thou art safe in the King's Garden!'

With these words ringing yet in his ears he suddenly awoke, and waking, wondered what ailed him. He felt faint and giddy; the walls of his prison appeared to rock to and fro as in an earthquake, and the nightly moonbeam falling aslant, struck his eyes sharply like a whip of fire. Something cold and heavy pressed with numbing force upon his heart,—an icy sense of suffocation rose in his throat,—and in the acute suffering of the moment, he struggled to his feet, though he could scarcely stand and only breathed with difficulty. The blood galloped feverishly in his veins,—then abruptly stilled itself and seemed to freeze,—the chill pang at his heart ceased, leaving his limbs numb and quivering. Exhausted by this spasm of physical agony, his head dropped feebly on his breast; and

he leaned against the wall for support, panting for breath, . . . when, . . . all at once a great light, like the pouring-out of liquid gold, flashed dazzlingly into his cell! He looked up, . . . and uttered a cry of rapture!—Again, again!—face to face with him in his lonely dungeon, — he beheld the ‘Nazarene’! The Vision Beautiful! — the shining Figure, the radiant Face of the Divine ‘Man of Sorrows’!—this was the marvellous Glory revealed within the gloom!

Awed, but not afraid, Barabbas raised his eyes to his supernal Visitant.

‘Lord—Lord!’ he gasped, faintly stretching his manacled hands blindly forth—‘I am not worthy! Why hast Thou come to me?—I, Barabbas, am unfit to look upon Thee! I should have died upon the cross, not Thou! Command me therefore to some place of punishment,—some desert in the darkest ways of death!—there let me rid myself of sin, if this be possible, by faith in Thee—by love!’——

He broke off, trembling,—and the great Christ seemed to smile. Filled with excess of joy, he now beheld that Divine Figure bending tenderly towards him,—gentle Hands were laid upon his bruised and

fettered wrists ; Hands that drew him close and closer yet, slowly and surely upwards,—upwards into such light and air as never gladdened earth ;—and a thrilling Voice whispered—

‘ Whosoever believeth in Me shall not abide in Darkness ! Enter thou into the joy of thy Lord ! ’

The light widened into a rippling sea of gold and azure,—the dungeon walls appeared to totter and crumble to nothingness,—bright forms of beauty grew up like flowers out of the clear pure space ; and such symphonic music sounded as made the rolling of planets in their orbits seem but the distant lesser notes of the vast eternal melody ; and thus,—clinging close to the strong Hands that held his, and looking with wondering grateful ecstasy into the Divine Eyes that smiled their pardon and eternal love upon him, Barabbas left his prison and went forth,—into the ‘ glorious liberty of the free ’ !



With the early dawn of the next day two men descended together in haste to visit the dungeon. One was the gaoler—the other was the stranger Melchior.

‘They shall not crucify Barabbas’—said the latter resolutely—‘I will be answerable for him, and myself defend him at his trial.’

‘Thou speakest boldly!’ returned the gaoler, eyeing him dubiously—‘But though thou hast the Emperor’s signet, and Caiaphas hath given thee permit to see the prisoner, these favours will not stay the progress of the law.’

‘Maybe not!’—said Melchior impatiently—‘Nevertheless the makers of the law in Jerusalem are corrupt; and their corruption shall be blazoned to the world if this lately pardoned man be again made to suffer. What influence can be obtained for him shall most assuredly be used. There is much good in this Barabbas.’

Here they reached the dungeon. Quickly unlocking the door, the gaoler peered in.

‘Barabbas!’

No answer was returned.

‘Barabbas, come forth!’

Still silence.

‘He sleeps soundly,’—said the gaoler, taking down a lantern which hung on the outside wall for use and lighting it,—‘We must needs go in and rouse him.’

Lamp in hand he entered the dismal cell, Melchior following. Barabbas lay on the ground, apparently sunk in a deep and peaceful slumber; his manacled hands were folded cross-wise on his breast. Melchior stepped hurriedly forward and bent down over him.

‘Barabbas!’

But Barabbas rested gravely mute. A flash from the prison-lantern showed that a smile was on his face; and that his dark and rugged features were smoothed and tranquillised into an expression of exceeding beauty. There was something grand and impressive in the aspect of his powerful figure lying thus passive in an attitude of such complete repose,—his crossed hands and closed eyes suggested that eternal calm wherein, as in a deep sea, is found the pearl of Infinite Knowledge.

Melchior rose from his brief examination of the quiet form; a vague melancholy shadowed his face.

‘We need argue no more concerning the fate of Barabbas!’ he said in hushed accents—‘Neither signets of emperors nor authority of priests can avail him now! We come too late! Whatever were his passions or crimes they are pardoned;—and a Higher Power than ours hath given him his liberty. Carry him forth gently;—he is dead!’

EPILOGUE

ONE afternoon at sunset two travellers stood together, looking their last on the white walls and enclosed gardens of Jerusalem. Silently absorbing the scene, they watched from a little hill above the city, the red sky glow like a furnace over the roofs and turrets, and flash fire upon the architectural splendour of that 'jewel of the earth' known as Solomon's Temple. They could see the summit of Calvary, bare and brown and deserted,—and in the lower distance the thick green foliage of Gethsemane. One of them, a man of singular height and massive build, knelt on the turf, and fixed his eyes with a passionate intensity on Calvary alone,—there his looks lingered with deep and wondering tenderness as though he saw some beatific vision on that lonely point which shone with a blood-red hue

in the ardent flame of the descending sun. His companion, no other than Melchior, turned and saw him thus entranced.

‘Sorrowest thou, Simon,’ he said gently—‘to leave this land which God hath visited? Vex not thy soul,—for God is ever with thee; and Calvary is not the wonder of Judæa, but of the wider world from henceforth. Judæa hath rejected the Divine, wherefore she herself shall be rejected.’

Simon of Cyrene, for it was he, looked up.

‘Yea, thou dost speak truly,’ he answered, ‘in this as in other things. Nevertheless I can but remember how I bore the Cross up yonder hill! Words can never tell the sweetness of the toil,—the joy and glory that surrounded me! And greater still the marvel of the raising of that Cross!—methought I held Salvation! Let me not speak of it,—my soul doth reel too near the verge of Heaven!—and once again I see His face—the face of God that smiled on me!’

Melchior did not speak for some minutes,—his own eyes were turned thoughtfully towards some scattered rocks on a plain to the left of the city,

which was sometimes called the 'Place of Tombs' on account of its numerous hewn-out sepulchres and burial-caves.

'Over there,'—he said presently, pointing thither; 'sleeps Barabbas whom I told thee of,—there where that solitary palm nods its half-withered leaves. 'Twas I who gave him burial,—no other living friend he seemed to have in all Jerusalem, despite the rapture of the foolish crowd the day he was set free. He was an untaught erring soul, yet not without some nobleness—a type of human Doubt aspiring unto Truth; methinks out of this aspiration only, he hath found both peace and pardon.'

He was silent a little,—then continued,

'Cyrenian, to thee was given the strength to bear the Cross; and in thy task thou didst obtain both faith and knowledge. All men may not win such sweet and sudden happiness,—for humanity is weak, not strong. Humanity can rarely sacrifice itself for God, and doth not willingly accept a burden not its own. Thou, who dost now resign thy home and kindred, thy fertile valleys of Cyrene, thy free and

thoughtless serving of thyself, for sake of serving the Divine, art wise before the days of wisdom, and wilt perchance know swiftly and at once, what it will take this wild unspiritual world long centuries to learn. The Messenger has come, and the Message has been given;—the Christ hath been slain and hath arisen from the dead, as symbol of the truth that Good shall triumph over Evil everlastingly,—nevertheless it will be long ere the lesson of Divine Perfection is understood by man.'

Simon, rising from his kneeling attitude, looked wistfully and with some curiosity at the speaker.

'Why should it be long?' he asked—'Since thou so speedily hast learned to recognise the Christ? Art thou more skilled in mysteries than other men?'

'If I should say so, 'twould be a boast unworthy' Melchior answered slowly—'And of the things occult I may not tell thee. But this much thou shalt hear. In early youth I was a king, . . . nay, man, wonder not!—kings are no marvel! The puppets of the nations merely,—prisoned round with vain trappings and idle shows,—the very scorn of all

who have obtained a true and glorious independence ! I learned in my brief kingship the worthlessness of sovereignty, the fickleness of crowds, the instability of friends, the foolishness of earthly power. When Christ was born in Bethlehem, a vision came upon me in the midwatches of the night, and an Angel stood before me, saying—"Arise, Melchior ! be thou the first monarch in the world to resign monarchy ; for the time hath come when crowns and kingdoms shall be utterly destroyed, as obstacles to the Brotherhood of Man. Get thee to Bethlehem of Judæa,—there shalt thou find the new-born God, the Prince of Peace, who will unite in one all nations,—and link Humanity to Heaven by the splendour of His Everlasting Name" !'

He paused enrapt,—Simon of Cyrene watched him awed and fascinated.

'The Angel vanished ;'—he continued—'And I arose straightway and went, and stayed not on my journey till I came to Bethlehem ; there did I lay my crown before the Child of Mary, and swear to Him my faith. I have followed Him from the cradle to the Cross ; I follow Him now from the

rent sepulchre of Earth, to the unbarred gate of Heaven!’

‘And I with thee!’ exclaimed Simon with eager fervour,—‘Lo, I am humble as a child—and I will learn of thee all that I should do!’

‘Nay, I can teach thee nothing;’—said Melchior gently—‘Thou hast borne the Cross—thou hast lifted the Christ,—the rest will be granted thee!’

He looked once more over the city which now seemed to float like a glittering mirage in the circling glory of the after-glow: the sun had sunk.

‘“*If thou hadst known, even in this thy day*”’—he quoted dreamily—‘Alas, alas! What of those who wilfully prefer ignorance to knowledge!’

‘Speakest thou of the misguided who have scorned and rejected the Divine?’ asked Simon—‘Surely ere long they all will be convinced,—yea, even Caiaphas’——

‘Thou simple soul!—thinkest thou that a liar can ever be convinced of truth? Nay—’tis a miracle

past all working! Through Caiaphas the stain of treachery will rest on the dead Judas; through Caiaphas will be denied the Resurrection,—through Caiaphas the very name of Christ will be banished from the Jewish annals. Bear thou this in mind,—that a so-called priest of God did crucify God's Messenger. 'Twill help thee to more clearly read the future!'

'Knowest thou,' said Simon suddenly—'that Peter hath returned from Bethany and boldly preacheth Christ crucified and risen?'

'Ay, doth he preach?' queried Melchior, with satiric melancholy—'And hath he grown so sudden bold? Even so doth he make late atonement! He hath a wondrous destiny—for half the world will grasp the creed devised by him who did deny his Master!'

Sighing, he turned away from the city view.

''Tis God's symbolic teaching,' he said, 'which few of us may understand. A language unlettered and vast as eternity itself! Upon that hill of Calvary to which thou, Simon, turnest thy parting looks of tenderness, hath been mystically enacted the world's

one Tragedy—the tragedy of Love and Genius slain to satisfy the malice of mankind. But Love and Genius are immortal; and immortality must evermore arise, wherefore in the dark days that are coming let us not lose our courage or our hope. There will be many forms of faith,—and many human creeds in which there is no touch of the Divine,—keep we to the faithful following of Christ, and in the midst of many bewilderments we shall not wander far astray. The hour grows late,—come, thou first hermit of the Christian world!—let us go on together!’

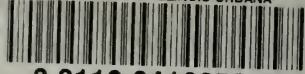
They descended the hill. Across the plains they passed slowly; taking the way that led towards the mystic land of Egypt, where the Pyramids lift their summits to the stars, and the Nile murmurs of the false gods forgotten. They walked in a path of roseate radiance left by a reflection of the vanished sun; and went onward steadily, never once looking back till their figures gradually diminished and disappeared. Swiftly the night gathered, and spread itself darkly over Jerusalem like a threatening shadow of storm and swift destruction; thunder was

in the air, and only one pale star peered dimly forth in the dusk, shining placidly over the Place of Tombs, where, in his quiet burial-cave, Barabbas slept beside the withering palm.

THE END.



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